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AT A GLANCE

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This year we mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day, the moment when six dark years of war ended, and peace returned to Britain. In the challenging times we face today, with lockdowns and restrictions to our personal freedoms, it is easier for us to empathise with the outburst of relief that followed the announcement the war was finally over. The deprivations we are experiencing today however, pale in comparison to those faced during wartime.

On the 8th of May 1945, Prime Minister Winston Churchill broadcast the news that the Second World War was over in Europe. The nation erupted into celebration: church bells rang out, people spilled onto the streets, the mood of relief and crowds growing through the day and into the night: the revellers even included two 'incognito Princesses', Elizabeth and Margaret!

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VICTORY IN EUROPE

From as early as January 1943, when the Red Army destroyed Hitler's 6th Army at Stalingrad, it was evident that the war in Europe could only end in one way – with the defeat of the Third Reich. The D-Day landings in Normandy the following year only served to reinforce this. Barely four months later, the first Allied troops, from the US First Army, set foot on German soil.

Yet the Germans fought on, as the Soviet forces inflicted one crushing defeat after another on the Eastern Front. The failure of Operation *Market Garden* in September 1944 saw the Anglo-American armies pause operations until the start of 1945, the Russians doing likewise. Then, in the early months of the last year of the war, the Allies attacked on all fronts. Gradually, the Germans were driven back, until Soviet troops stormed into Berlin in April 1945.

With no hope of holding back the combined might of his enemies, Hitler committed suicide on April 30. A week later, on May 7, Germany surrendered. The Third Reich had passed into history.

What drove the German people to fight to the end, knowing that utter ruin and devastation was the inevitable consequence of continuing to resist? Why did the generals continue to follow Hitler's orders when his decisions repeatedly led to avoidable and crushing defeats? Was it the Allies who won the war in Europe, or was it Hitler who lost it?

John Grehan

John Grehan
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT: The editorial team would like to thank Robert Mitchell for his assistance with the images in this publication.

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PO Box 100, Stamford, Lincolnshire, PE9 1XQ
E-mail: enquiries@keypublishing.com
www.keypublishing.com
Distribution: Seymour Distribution Ltd.
Telephone: 020 7429400
Printed by Precision Colour Printing Ltd, Haldane, Halesfield 1, Telford, Shropshire. TF7 4QQ
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Published by Key Publishing Ltd.
www.britainatwar.com

The battle-scared Brandenburg Gate soon after the end of the fighting in Berlin in May 1945. This view is taken looking east, from Pariser Platz, towards the Tiergarten. (Historic Military Press)

CONTENTS

6 **THE BATTLE NO ONE WANTED**
In the autumn of 1944, Allied forces crossed the border into Germany and clashed with the Germans at Aachen.

11 **ADVANCE TO THE ODER**
In the depths of the winter of 1944-45, the Red Army began its greatest offensive campaign of the war.

18 **WAR AND PEACE: THE YALTA CONFERENCE**
The fate, and future, of Europe lay in the hands of just three men – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin.

21 **BREECHING THE LAST BARRIER**
In protracted and bloody fighting, British, American and Canadian troops finally reached the banks of the River Rhine.

30 **THE GATES OF BERLIN**
Fifty miles from Berlin are the Seelow Heights, the Russians' last geographical barrier to the heart of the Third Reich.

33 **HANDSHAKE ON THE ELBE**
On April 25, 1945, Soviet and American troops met for the first time near Torgau on the River Elbe.

38 **THE DRIVE ON HAMBURG**
Whilst the Americans headed to the south, British forces battled their way to Germany's biggest port and its second city.

43 **THE LAST BATTLE**
After five years of warfare, the final encounter in Europe centred on just one city – Berlin.

52 **FINAL DAYS IN THE FÜHRERBUNKER**
For the Third Reich the end was imminent, just as it was for those who remained in the bunker with Hitler.

The Stars and Stripes are raised over the former headquarters of Field Marshal Keitel at Berchtesgaden, 1945. (NARA)

US troops passing through a gap in the Westwall, or Siegfried Line, during the fighting in late 1944. (NARA)

Members of the Royal Family step out on a balcony to acknowledge the huge crowds that gathered in front of Buckingham Palace on May 8, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

Sergeant R.S. Baker of the Army Film & Photographic Unit looks at a fallen Nazi eagle and swastika amidst the ruins of Hitler's Reich Chancellery in Berlin, July 3, 1945.

57 'HITLER IS DEAD!'
On the evening of May 1, 1945, the world heard the news that many had waited so long to hear.

63 THE FOURTH REICH
Germany was beaten and Hitler was dead, yet there was a last attempt to continue Nazi rule.

66 SURRENDER
Arranging the means by which the fighting could be ended proved far from straightforward.

75 VICTORY IN EUROPE
At last the expected announcement was made – the war against Germany was finally over.

82 THE LAST LIBERATIONS
The war many have officially ended on May 8, but some German garrisons did not give up their arms on that day.

86 TRIUMPH
The Allies marked their victory in the time-honoured fashion, by marching through the streets of the capital.

89 A BEATEN NATION
How the Germans would be treated in 1945 would determine the future stability of Europe.

94 AN IRON CURTAIN
During a speech in the United States of America on March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill detailed how the Cold War had begun.

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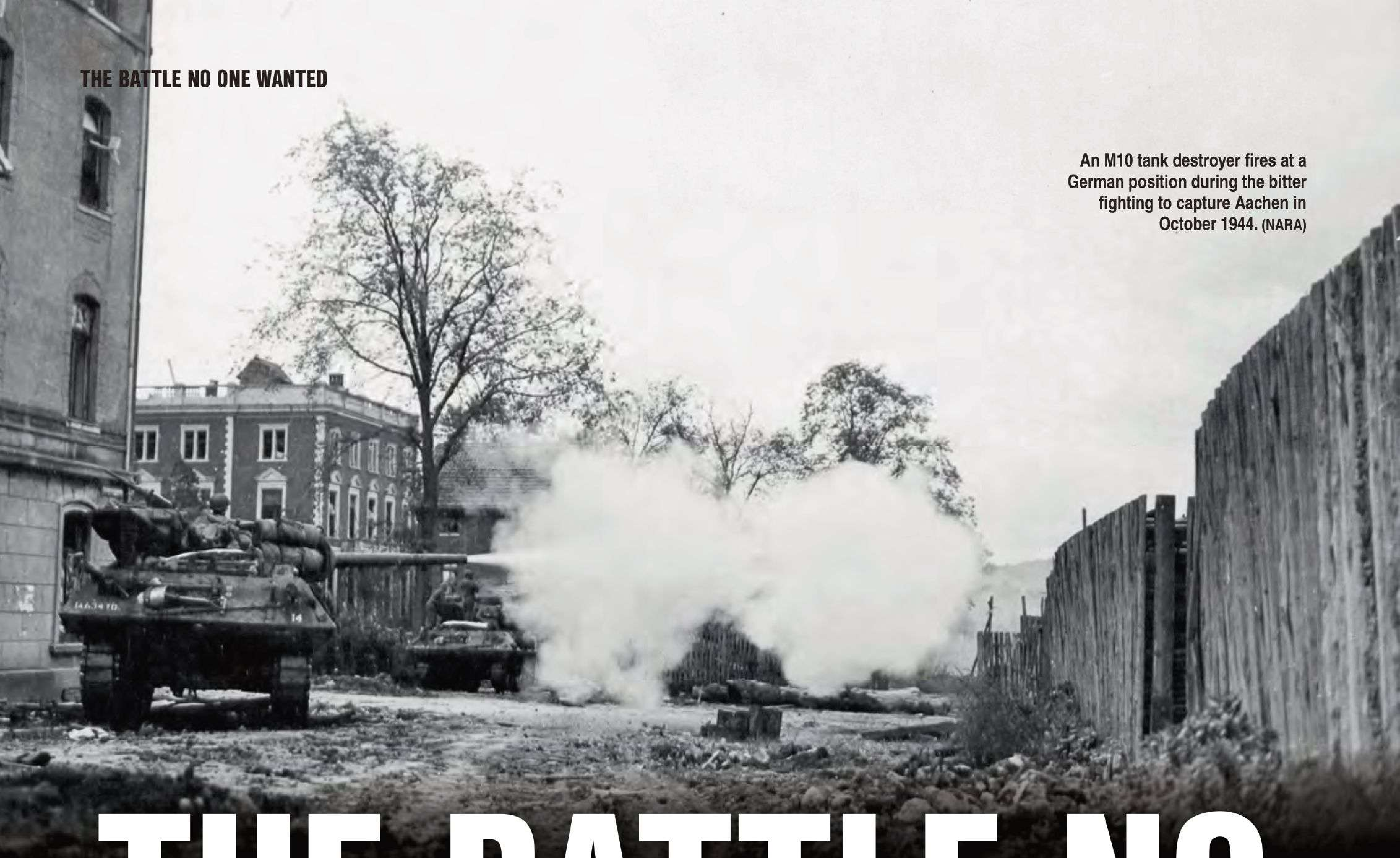


An M10 tank destroyer fires at a German position during the bitter fighting to capture Aachen in October 1944. (NARA)

THE BATTLE NO ONE WANTED

In the autumn of 1944, Allied forces crossed the border into Germany and clashed with the Germans at Aachen. It was a city which the Allied generals did not want to capture, and the Germans did not want to defend.

The year 1944 had been one of unmitigated disaster for Hitler's 'Thousand Year' Reich. In the west, British, Canadian, French and American forces had breached the Führer's Atlantic Wall and liberated France and much of the Low Countries. By September, Field Marshal Montgomery's 21st Army Group, on the northern wing of the Allied advance, and General Dwight Eisenhower's 6th and 12th army groups to the south, were poised to break into Germany.

However, the speed of the Allied armies in the west had been such that they had outstripped their logistical support, with supply lines stretching all the way back to Normandy. It was essential, therefore, to capture some of the ports along the coast of France and Belgium before any advance into Germany could be contemplated.

Consequently, once Allied forces had crossed the River Seine, Eisenhower shifted 12th Army Group's zone of advance northward, along the Channel coast. In order to maintain contact between the British and American forces, Eisenhower split the 12th Army Group so that Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges' US First Army passed north of the Ardennes, where it covered the right flank of the British. This decision placed Hodges' men opposite Aachen, the westernmost German city, close to the Belgium and Dutch borders.

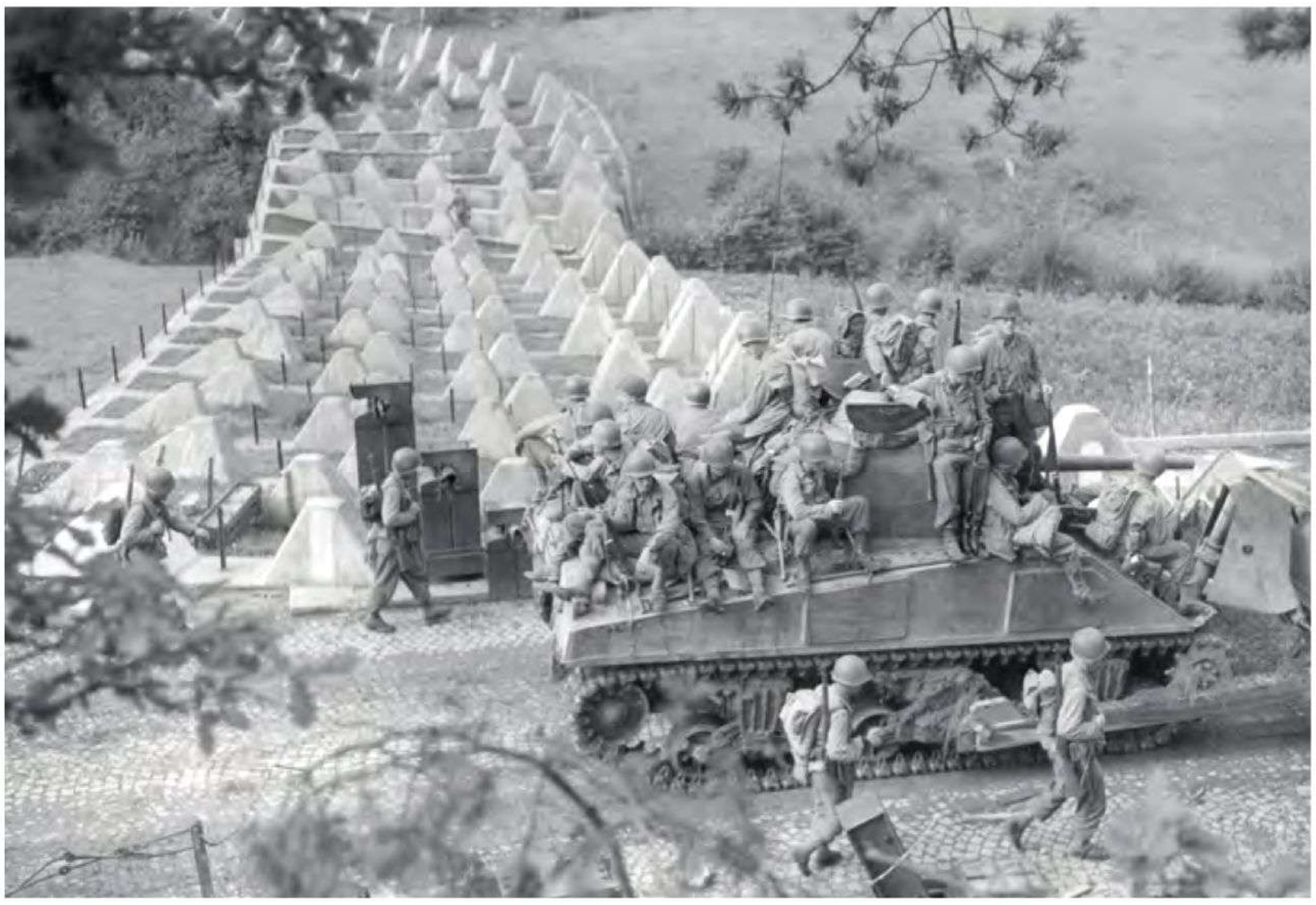
As the First Army swept round towards Aachen, an opportunity to trap the remnants of the German 7th and 15th armies, which were retreating towards Germany, presented itself. Hodges ordered his leading unit, Major General J. Lawton Collins' VII Corps, to swing round to its left to ensnare the fleeing enemy. VII Corps was able to block the roads north of Mons and by September 3 was in position. Over the course of the next few days, as many as 20 very weakened German divisions were caught in the 'Mons pocket', and some 25,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner.

AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

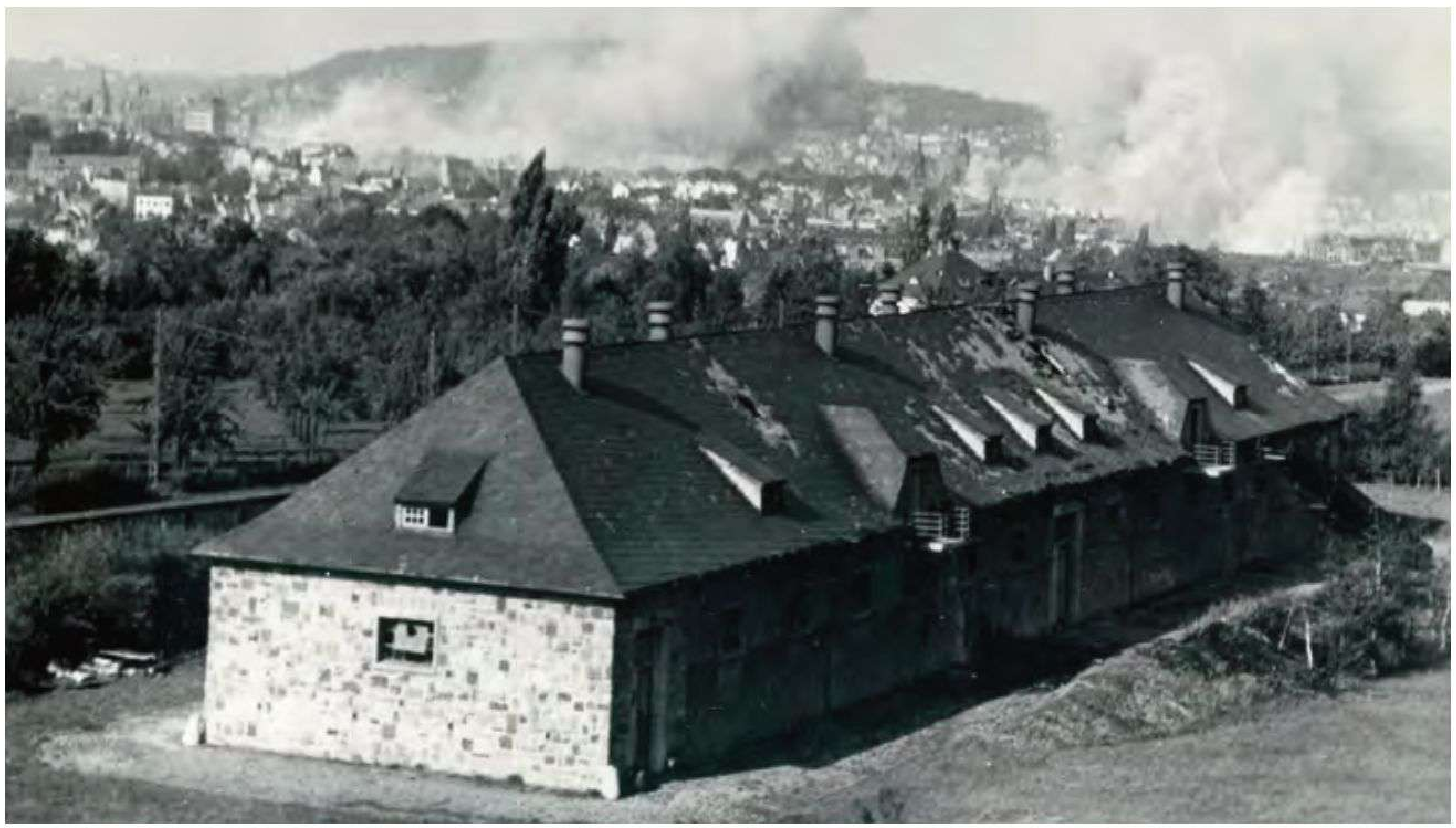
Major General Collins' men now found themselves on the German border. A defining moment in the history of the war took place at 18.05 hours on the evening of Monday, September 11, 1944. "The shadows were growing long as five men from the Second Platoon, Troop B, 85th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, 5th US Armored Division, reached the west bank of the Our River," noted the historian Charles B. MacDonald. "Though the bridge over the Our had been demolished, the water was shallow enough for the men to wade across. On the far bank they climbed a hill to a cluster of farm buildings. Nearby they could see some 19 or 20 concrete pillboxes. Around one somebody had built a shed for chickens. The men made only a hasty inspection before starting back."[1]

The US patrol, led by Staff Sergeant Warner W. Holzinger, had crossed the border near the village of Stolzembourg. Barely four months after the landings in Normandy, the first Allied troops, east or west, had set foot on German soil.

"Sergeant Holzinger's patrol preceded others only by a matter of hours," continued MacDonald. "In early evening, a reinforced company of the 109th Infantry, 28th Division, crossed the Our on a bridge between Weiswampach, in the northern tip of Luxembourg, and the German village of Sevenig. Almost coincidentally, southeast of St. Vith, Belgium, a patrol from the 22d Infantry, 4th Division, also crossed the Our near the village of Hemmeres. Men of this patrol spoke to civilians and, to provide proof of their crossing, procured a German cap, some currency, and a packet of soil."



US troops and armour passing through a gap in the Westwall, or Siegfried Line, near the town of Roetgen, September 28, 1944. Roetgen was the first municipality in Germany to be captured by the Americans. (Everett Historical/Shutterstock)



The German city of Aachen being bombarded from the air and ground on October 12, 1944. The original caption states that this picture shows "Aachen being given the 'once-over' by P-38s and P-47s after its refusal of the Allied surrender ultimatum, which expired at 10:40 yesterday morning [the 11th]. Artillery collaborates with planes in reducing the town, as this view taken of the bombardment from an observation point on the edge of Aachen shows." (Historic Military Press)

Not far from where the American troops had penetrated into Germany lay the tempting prize of the spa city of Aachen. The city, though, was not a stated objective. The Americans expected to sweep past it and on towards the Rhine – but only when logistics permitted a calculated advance. When the First Army entered Germany, it was 233 days ahead of schedule!

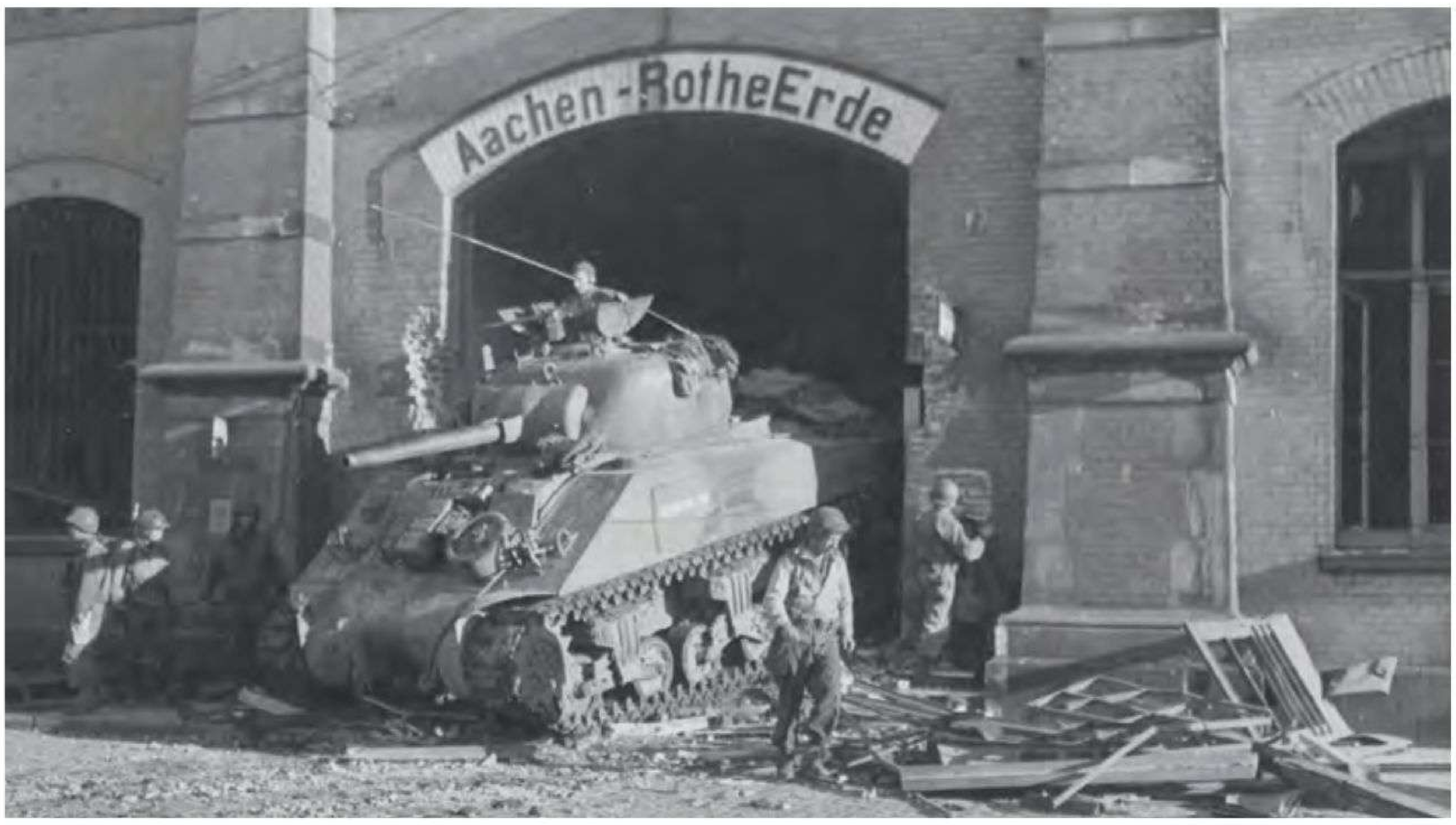
The problem of supplies, nevertheless, was severe, to the extent that part of the First Army, XIX Corps, ran out of fuel on September 9 and on the very day that VII Corps crossed into Germany, First Army had to rely on captured rations to feed the troops, and stocks of ammunition had to be carefully managed.

THE WESTWALL

The German forces that had escaped from France quickly reassembled behind the fortified line known as the Westwall, more popularly known as the Siegfried Line. This was a line of some 3,000 mutually supporting pillboxes, bunkers, and observation posts covering the entire western border of Germany, work on which began in 1936 when Hitler re-occupied the Rhineland. Since the German occupation of France in 1940, the Westwall had fallen into disuse, though it still remained a considerable barrier to any advance from the west.

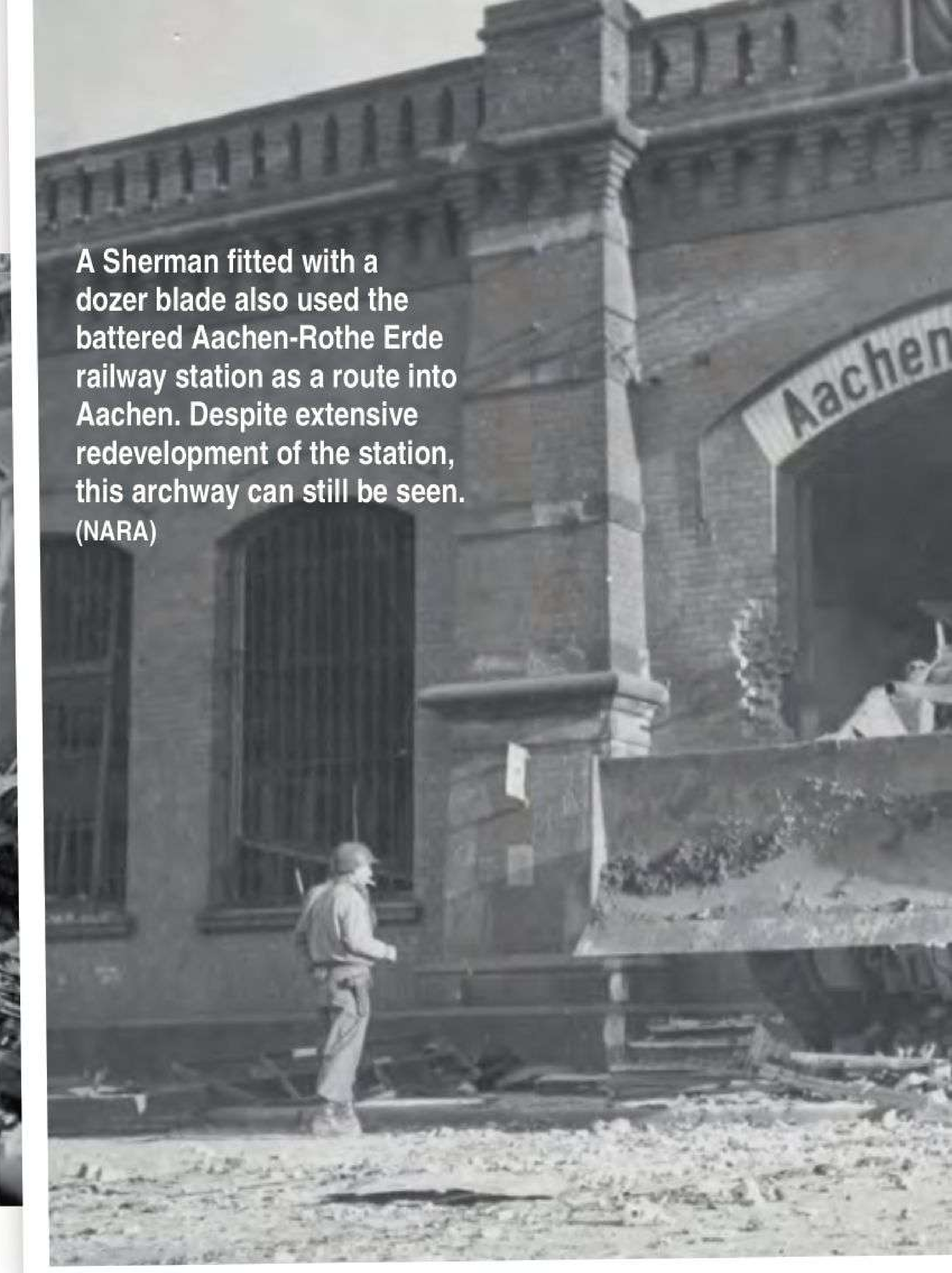
Aachen sat firmly within the Westwall, nestled within two belts of bunkers and obstacles, one to the west of the city and the other to the east. The sector was, in fact, one of the most heavily fortified portions of the Westwall, though Aachen itself was unfortified. The city had been badly damaged by Allied bombing and, with the approach of the Americans, an evacuation of the civilian population had begun.

In a most astonishing set of circumstances, Allied generals had no intention of taking Aachen and German



An American M4 Sherman, described as 'one of the first tanks to enter Aachen', squeezes through the west entrance to Aachen-Rothe Erde railway station. When the adjacent Trierer Straße bridge over the railway was blown up by the Germans, the US troops used the main station entrances as a new route into the centre of Aachen from the south-east. (NARA)

US infantry, and supporting armoured and engineer units, gather in front of Aachen-Rothe Erde railway station before pushing on towards the city centre. (NARA)



A Sherman fitted with a dozer blade also used the battered Aachen-Rothe Erde railway station as a route into Aachen. Despite extensive redevelopment of the station, this archway can still be seen. (NARA)

generals had no plans to defend it, yet the city became the scene of the largest urban battle fought by US forces in the Second World War. Hitler, on the other hand, could not countenance this historically significant German city falling into Allied hands. Aachen, or Aix-la-Chappelle, was the medieval Imperial residence of Charlemagne, and where 31 Holy Roman Emperors had been crowned Kings of the Germans. Charlemagne's empire was considered to be the First Reich, and the leader of the Third Reich could not allow Charlemagne's city to be given up.

The defence of Aachen was entrusted to General Gerhard von Schwerin's 116th Panzer Division. Schwerin decided to halt the evacuation and surrender the city to the Americans who, in the form of VII Corps, began a penetration of the Westwall south of the city hoping to quickly break through into the Cologne plain beyond. "I stopped the absurd evacuation of this town," ran the text of the document Schwerin prepared for transmission to the American commander. "Therefore, I am responsible for the fate of its inhabitants and I ask you, in the case of an occupation by your troops, to take care of the unfortunate population in a humane way. I am the last German Commanding Officer in the sector of Aachen." But before Schwerin could deliver his document of capitulation, Hitler intervened, and Schwerin was ordered to counterattack.

Unfortunately for Schwerin, though his letter of capitulation did not reach Collins, it did find its way to Hitler, who ordered Schwerin's immediate arrest. He was replaced by Oberst Gerhard Wilck, who, only too well aware of the consequences of showing any form of defeatism, promised "to hold this ancient town to the last men and if necessary, to be buried in its ruins". Wilck defiantly declared that he and his men would fight "to the last grenade".[2] His actions, it will be seen, would not match his words.

A crewman fires the .50-calibre Browning machine-gun mounted on an M10 tank destroyer at a German position in Aachen, October 15, 1944. (Historic Military Press)

MEDAL OF HONOR

For the following few days, VII Corps' 1st Division drove deeper into German territory, occupying the ground on three sides of Aachen. But the American advance ground to a halt on September 16 when the fuel eventually ran out. There was little possibility of an immediate re-supply due to existing stocks being diverted north for Operation *Market Garden*.

This pause enabled the Germans to reinforce the troops in Aachen sector. General Friedrich Köchling's LXXXI Corps took up positions in the Westwall around Aachen, though Schwerin remained in command in the city itself.

After a preliminary artillery and aerial bombardment which lasted for six days, the Americans renewed their assault upon Aachen on October 2 with a pincer movement. This would see General Leland Hobbs' 30th Infantry Division, supported by the tanks of the 2nd Armored Division, attacking from the north, while the 1st Division launched its attack from the south.

The 30th Division was the first to move. The men promptly encountered stiff German resistance, the defences of the Westwall proving far tougher to penetrate than had been expected. Progress was slow, with the Germans counterattacking at every stage. Further reinforcements were also moved into the Aachen sector in the form of the 3rd Panzergrenadier Division followed by the I SS Panzer Corps.

It was not until October 8 that the US 1st Division delivered its attack upon Aachen from the south. Having been reinforced, the Germans were able to mount a vigorous defence. Nevertheless, the Americans were able to capture the high ground that dominated the city. During the fighting for what was known as Crucifix Hill by the village of Haaren, Captain Robert "Bobbie" Evan Brown Jr. wrote his name in the history books. Brown commanded Company C

US infantry making their way through the battered streets of Aachen. (NARA)

Technical Sergeant Robert O. Beerman, a combat photographer with the US 9th Air Force, took this picture of what the original caption refers to as "an enemy strong-point in Aachen". The caption adds that "the frame effect resulted from the fact that the photographer… had to work well back in the building to conceal himself from a German observation post one hundred yards away". (NARA)

of the 18th Infantry Regiment, which had been tasked with taking the heavily fortified Crucifix Hill. As his leading rifle platoon assaulted the first of many pillboxes that studded the rising ground, it was raked by fire from another emplacement on its flank and the men were pinned down and then shelled by German artillery.

"Seeing that the pillboxes must be neutralized to prevent the slaughter of his men," ran the wording of his citation for the Medal of Honor, "Capt. Brown obtained a pole charge and started forward alone toward the first pillbox, about 100 yards away. Hugging the ground while enemy bullets whipped around him, he crawled and then ran toward the aperture of the fortification, rammed his explosive inside and jumped back as the pillbox and its occupants were blown up.

"He re-joined the assault platoon, secured another pole charge, and led the way toward the next pillbox under continuous artillery mortar, automatic, and small-arms fire. He again ran forward and placed his charge in the enemy fortification, knocking it out. He then found that fire from a third pillbox was pinning down his company; so, he returned to his men, secured another charge, and began to creep and crawl toward the hostile emplacement. With heroic bravery he disregarded opposing fire and worked ahead in the face of bullets streaming from the pillbox. Finally reaching his objective, he stood up and inserted his explosive, silencing the enemy."

The capture of Crucifix Hill, and the adjoining heights, placed the 1st Division in a commanding position above Aachen. Collins ordered the 30th and 1st divisions to link up. This was achieved and the city was effectively encircled. There was no hope now for Aachen, which was certain to fall.

'I'VE BEEN IN HELL!'

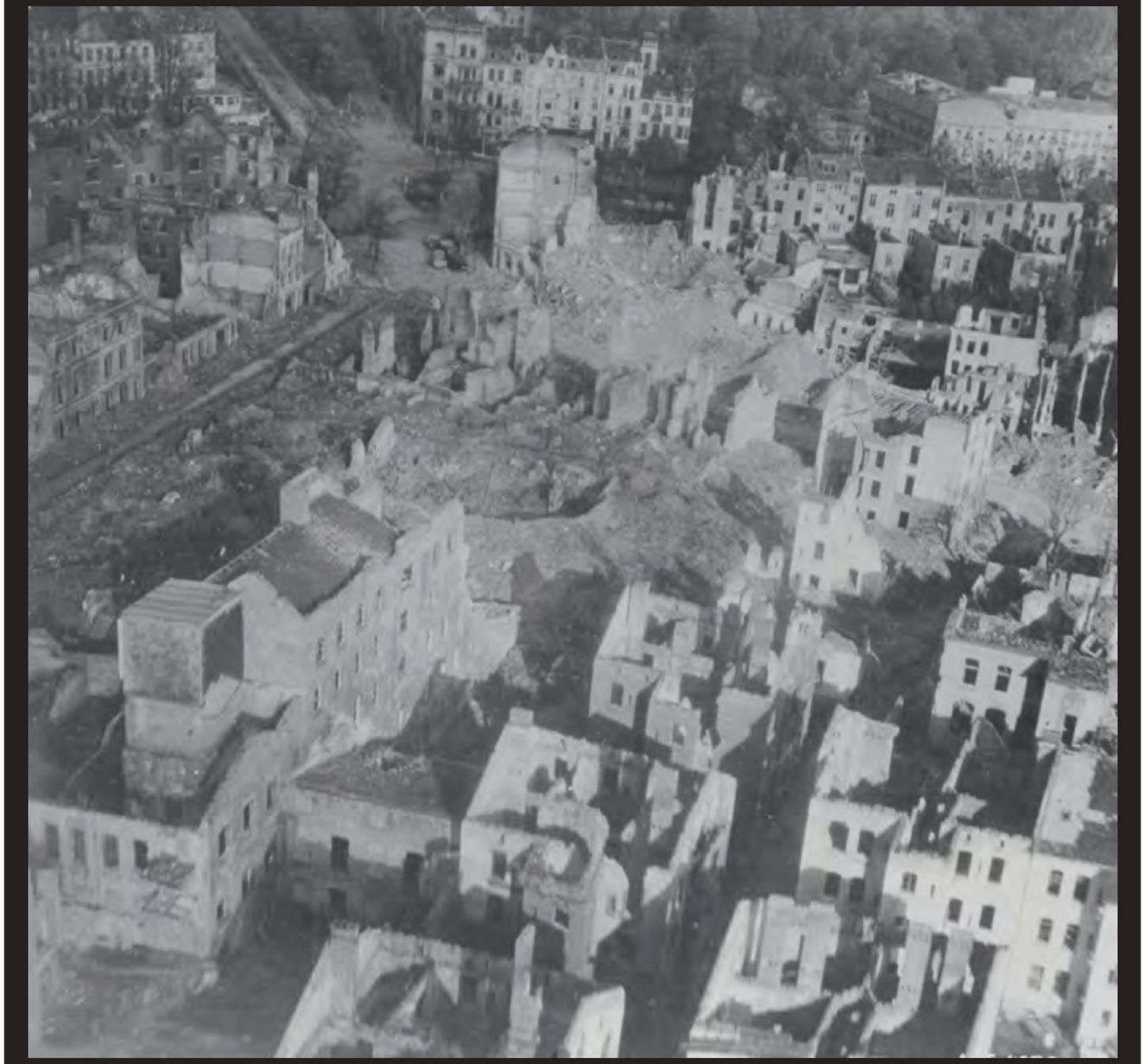
On October 10, 1944, the Americans presented the remaining German troops with an ultimatum. "The city of Aachen is now completely surrounded by American forces," it said. "If the city is not promptly and completely surrendered unconditionally, the American Army ground and Air Forces will proceed ruthlessly with air and artillery bombardment to reduce it to submission." The Germans did not accept the ultimatum and, when the offer expired 24 hours later, on October 11, the Americans unleashed a massive air and artillery bombardment.

It was IX Tactical Air Command that opened the assault. Between 11.00 hours and 15.45 hours, the aircraft delivered more than 62 tons of bombs on the German positions. When the aerial onslaught ended, VII Corps' artillery took over, and, by October 12, had delivered 169 tons of ground-fired ordinance into Aachen. ⏩

German prisoners are searched following their capture in the battle for Aachen, October 1944. (NARA)

Aachen Cathedral towers over the some of the city's ruins. Though the cathedral was badly damaged in the fighting, the basic structure survived. Reconstruction and restoration took place intermittently over the following 30 years and in 1978, the cathedral was one of the first 12 locations listed as world heritage sites by UNESCO. (Historic Military Press)

A BATTERED SHELL



The "reduction of Aachen" resulted in extensive damage throughout the city – as this aerial view testifies. It is "as dead as a Roman ruin," wrote an American observer at the time. "But unlike a ruin it has none of the grace of gradual decay… Burst sewers, broken gas mains and dead animals have raised an almost overpowering smell in many parts of the city. The streets are paved with shattered glass; telephone, electric light and trolley cables are dangling and netted together everywhere, and in many places wrecked cars, trucks, armored vehicles and guns litter the street." (NARA)

At the height of the bombardment, 48 German officers and men stumbled into a 26th Infantry outpost and surrendered. The Germans were so petrified by the intense shelling and bombing that some of them verged on hysteria. "I've been in hell!", a young German NCO screamed.[3]

While this bombardment was being unleashed, the encircling Americans moved in, but the Germans, fighting on home soil, fought for every inch of the city in desperate battles in the ruined streets. With defeat staring him in the face, on October 19 Wilck sent out an order to his troops calling for a fight to the last man and the last bullet. How many German troops received this directive is not known, as resistance was clearly crumbling.

An endless column of German prisoners snakes it way through Aachen after the city's capture in 1944. (NARA)

The end came on October 21, when elements of the 3rd Battalion of the 26th Infantry Regiment closed in on an air raid shelter south of the Lousberg Hill on the northern edge of the city. The Americans were unaware that it housed Wilck's headquarters.

Lieutenant Colonel Corley, the battalion commander, dispatched his attached 155mm self-propelled gun to reduce the position. Before the gun could open fire, Wilck sent out a white flag in the hands of some American prisoners who were being held in the bunker. He broadcast a last radio message proclaiming his loyalty to Hitler and to Germany, just in case Hitler or any of his acolytes could somehow exact retribution for surrendering Aachen, and then, rather than bury himself in the ruins of the city, he turned himself over to the Americans. The surrender of the Aachen garrison took effect at 12.05 hours.

"German civilians are giving Yanks the V-sign, the glad hand, free beer, big smiles…"

OCCUPATION

For this small corner of Germany, the war was over, and the benign Allied occupation had begun. Whilst many Germans were quick to appreciate the advantages of having been liberated by the Americans, the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper warned US troops, "Don't Get Chummy With Jerry".

In a three-column article, the newspaper noted that "German civilians are giving Yanks the V-sign, the glad hand, free beer, big smiles, plenty of talk about not being Nazis at heart, and hurray for democracy. Some GIs and plenty of officers are returning the smiles, flirting with the Frauleins, drinking the beer, and starting to think what nice folks the Germans really are."

NOTES:

1. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Center of Military History, Washington DC, 1993), p.3.
2. Ian Kershaw, *The End, Germany 1944-45* (Penguin, London, 2012), p.70.
3. Quoted in, *The Battle of Aachen*, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1985, pp.91-2.

Russian armour pictured during the Vistula–Oder Offensive. Launched on January 12, 1945, this Red Army assault, which lasted until February 2, saw the fall of places such as Krakow, Warsaw and Posen. (RIA Novosti Archive, #611869/Alexander Kapustyanskiy/CC-BY-SA 3.0)

ADVANCE TO THE ODER

In the depths of the winter of 1945, the Red Army began its greatest offensive campaign of the war. Its ultimate objective was the capital of the Third Reich, Berlin.

With the Western Allies already on German soil, Stalin was anxious to see his armies marching for Berlin and, by the end of 1944, the Germans had been driven out of most of the republics of the Soviet Union that they had occupied since the beginning of Operation *Barbarossa* in 1941. With the start of the New Year, the Red Army and Air Force had assembled in huge numbers to attack the Germans along the whole of the Eastern Front as the prelude to the assault upon Hitler's Reich.

The strength of the forces available to Marshal Georgy Zhukov were impressive. Along the 1,500-mile front, the Soviets massively outnumbered their enemies. In actual numbers, Hitler's Eastern Army, the Ostheer, numbered around 2,000,000 men, and was equipped with 4,785 panzers and 29,000 artillery pieces. The Soviets, meanwhile, could muster a truly staggering 11,500,000 infantry (though only 6,700,000 were in the front-line), as well as 15,000 tanks, 108,000 artillery pieces and 15,000 aircraft.

Though the fighting in the East was virtually continuous, it was at 04.35 hours on January 12, 1945, that the last great Soviet campaign of the Second World War, the Vistula–Oder Offensive, was launched. The guns of the 1st Ukrainian Front unleashed massive artillery bombardment upon the 17th Army and the 4th Panzer Army; by midday, the latter had lost two-thirds of its artillery pieces and a quarter of its men. It was then that the Soviets attacked across the frozen plains of southern Poland in what was to be their greatest offensive of the war. The German line collapsed and by nightfall the Red Army had penetrated more than 20 miles across a 25-mile-wide front.

Though the Germans were stunned by the overwhelming weight and ferocity of the attack, German leaders had fully expected the Soviet assault. Stalin had concentrated his forces at the points of attack to give him an even greater degree of local superiority than his already mustered armies, as Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, Acting Chief of the General Staff of the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH), later recalled: "We calculated that the attack would begin on 12 January. The Russians' superiority to us was 11:1 in infantry, 7:1 in tanks, 20:1 in guns. An evaluation of the enemy's total strength gave him a superiority of approximately 15:1 on the ground and 20:1 in the air."

ZHUKOV STRIKES

The following day the 2nd Byelorussian Front launched its attack and, finally, on the 14th Zhukov opened his account with the 1st Byelorussian Front. By this date, the German army facing Zhukov was fully alive to the possibility of an attack, but there was simply

▶

nothing that the 9th Army could do to stop the Soviet onslaught. Hitler responded in the manner he had so frequently adopted when the news from the front was bad – he sacked the generals in charge.

By this stage of the war, most of the finest and most experienced of the German Army's general officers had been replaced, dismissed and, in some cases, executed for their involvement in the *Valkyrie* assassination attempt on July 20, 1944. Sacking his generals at a time when cohesion was of the utmost importance merely added to the chaos the Germans were mired in. The armies were reorganised, with what was Army Group A becoming Army Group Mitte and the 9th Army becoming part of Army Group Weichsel (Vistula). At the same time, this latter formation was placed under the command of Heinrich Himmler, who had never held a field command in his life.

Troops of the Polish First Army parade in Warsaw after the city was taken by Russian forces, on January 19, 1945. The Polish First Army was formed in the Soviet Union in 1944. (Courtesy of Marek Tuszyński)

Personnel of the Polish First Army in the ruins of Warsaw, and more specifically Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, soon after the arrival of Zhukov's forces. The scale of the destruction wrought on the Polish capital during the Second World War is laid bare by the fact that by January 1945, between 85% and 90% of the buildings had been completely destroyed. (Courtesy of Marek Tuszyński)

The next blow to be struck by Stalin's masses was against the 4th Army and the 3rd Panzer Army by the 3rd Byelorussian Front and the 1st Baltic Front driving towards Königsberg (now the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad) in Pomerania. After the initial assaults, fresh divisions took over the attack as the Soviet advance maintained its momentum. On January 17, Warsaw fell. Hitler, incensed at the abandonment of this 'fortress', ordered the arrest of *Oberst* Bogislaw von Bonin, the head of the Operations Branch of the OKH and the man who had sanctioned the German withdrawal. The Gestapo promptly imprisoned von Bonin in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp.

The Polish capital had suffered terribly during the four-and-a-half years of German occupation. The once bustling city of more than 1,300,00 people was now an almost empty ruin, with just 162,000 people left amidst its battered buildings, the legacy of the uprising of the previous autumn.

Also, on the 17th the Second Ukrainian Front reached the outskirts of Budapest after very heavy fighting. Three days later, Hungary's acting Prime Minister, Béla Miklós, signed an armistice in Moscow, though pro-German elements of the Hungarian Army continued to resist the Soviet forces.

The next day, January 21, saw another significant event – the Soviet occupation of Tannenberg. The Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914 resulted in one of the greatest German victories of the First World War. Its capture, and the destruction of the large monument to Generalfeldmarschall Hindenburg, symbolised just how weak the German army had become.

While the Germans were held frontally, the 2nd Byelorussian Front pushed through the German 2nd Army, sealing off East Prussia and all but trapping the German armies. In a bid to try and save itself from destruction, one of these

Russian artillery engaging targets during the fighting for a Hungarian town or city in 1945. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

Red Army soldiers in action in the streets of the Hungarian city of Kecskemét, in the central part of the country, during the Soviet advance in 1945. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

formations, General der Infanterie Friedrich Hossbach's 4th Army, abandoned the strong defences around the Masurian Lakes, including Hitler's former headquarters, the Wolfsschanze. Predictably, Hitler relieved Hossbach of his position – he had been in command of the 4th Army for just two days.

Such moves were to no avail as the Red Army moved too quickly, and the 4th Army, eight divisions of the 2nd Army and the remnants of the 3rd Panzer Army, a total of some 400,000 men, were cut off from the rest of the German armies. These men occupied positions around the powerfully defended fortress-city of Königsberg, and though they held out until the second week of April, they were eventually destroyed by the overwhelming might of the Soviet forces that surrounded them. By the end of January, almost the whole of East Prussia was in Soviet hands.

Russian infantry manning a barricade in a suburb of Budapest during the siege. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

"We were now on German territory," recalled Evgeni Bessonov, a tank commander with the Soviet 4th Tank Army, "and everything there was different from what we saw in Poland. Highways were covered with asphalt; roads to fields and barns were covered with cobblestones. We saw clean pine woods… rich houses and mansions, small roadside villages and farms with peaked red-tile roofs. However, there was not a single living soul… The population had been evacuated westwards across the Oder, leaving all their belongings in the houses, including cattle and poultry."[1]

HITLER IN COMMAND

After Warsaw, the next most important Polish fortress-city, or Festungen, to be attacked was Posen (Poznań), which was encircled by the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 8th Guards Army on January 24. As at Königsberg, the Germans mounted a stubborn defence, holding out for a month before the garrison surrendered. On February 22, the garrison commander, Generalmajor Ernest Gonell, gave his troops permission to attempt to escape, but it was too late. Gonell refused to be captured and committed suicide by lying down on a flag and shooting himself in the head.

The aftermath of the Siege of Budapest, which ended, after one month, two weeks and six days, on February 13, 1945. The encirclement by Russian and Romanian troops had started back at the end of December 1944. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

Frustrated by what he saw as treachery and cowardice by his generals, Hitler had taken personal control of the direction of the war in December 1941. This decision took a terrible toll on both the German Army and Hitler's health. He believed that courage and determination, rather than sound intellectual thinking, would win battles and he insisted that none of his armies should retreat, even though this often led to troops being massacred or captured – men who otherwise might have escaped to fight another day. The Führer believed that good German soldiers should stand and fight to the end. They did and they died.

Those who had lived and worked alongside Hitler in the Wolfsschanze saw how much the added burden of directing the war on a daily basis affected his mental, and, seemingly with it, his physical health. This was compounded by the assassination attempt of July 20, 1944, in which he was wounded. He was never quite the same again.

At one point in late September, Hitler could not get out of bed and stopped reading the reports from the front, which almost always made depressing reading. "It seemed to me," wrote one of the Führer's secretaries, Traudl Junge, "as if his body had suddenly understood the pointlessness of all the efforts made by his mind and his strong will and had gone on strike."[2] His decisions became increasingly unrealistic, refusing to countenance any news or information which did not fit his vision of events.

The ability of the German generals to respond to situations they encountered on the battlefield was severely hampered when, on January 19, 1945, Hitler issued a directive in which all commanding generals, as low as divisional level, had to seek permission from the Führer before they could carry out any operation other than those which Hitler had already ordered. This included any attack or withdrawal. The officers were expected to allow sufficient time for a request to reach the Führer, for him to consider his response, and for that decision to be relayed back to the officer at the front. It was not just sheer weight of numbers which doomed the German Army to defeat.

Despite the inevitability of the outcome of the Soviet offensive, the determined defence of Königsberg and Posen on his flank had considerably compromised Zhukov's aim of being quickly across the River Oder. The Red Army had advanced 300 miles from the Vistula to the Oder in just two weeks

German troops head off to captivity, at the hands of the Red Army, after being taken prisoner during the fighting in and around the Hungarian resort town of Balatonalmádi. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

Knocked out German tanks and armoured vehicles pictured after their capture by Russian troops during the fighting for the central Hungarian city of Székesfehérvár. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

Russian soldiers raise the Soviet flag over a street in a part of Budapest during the fighting in 1945. (Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg)

"It was hard to watch them. I remember their faces, especially their eyes which betrayed their ordeal."

An unusual reminder of the fighting in the area around the River Oder in 1945. The words carved into this tree near Bielinek in Poland translate as "March 1945, Death to the Germans". (Courtesy of Krzysztof Ziarnek)

and he could not risk a further advance with the danger that these German forces could fall on his long and highly vulnerable line of communications. The river was to become the new frontline, where a partly constructed defensive position, the Nibelungen-Stellung, ranged along the whole of its west bank. It was on February 2 that Hitler ordered Himmler's Army Group Vistula to throw back any Soviet units which had crossed the Oder and then to take of the defence of the river.

Himmler's force was composed of what remained of the 9th Army and the 2nd Army, as well as the newly formed 11th SS Panzer Army. This was hardly a formidable force, but Himmler did have one major advantage. Having been pushed back into Germany, the Army was much closer to the home airfields of the Luftwaffe, while the Red Air Force was at the end of a long supply chain and aviation fuel was extremely limited. The Soviet pilots were also operating from temporary airstrips, often located in boggy fields. Aware of the importance of holding the line of the Oder, Luftflotte 6 was increased to a strength of 1,838 aircraft by February 3.

AUSCHWITZ

It was in the afternoon of January 27 that the Soviet 322nd Rifle Division of the 1st Ukrainian Front Army stumbled upon a sight that would, no doubt, haunt them for the rest of their lives, the extermination camp of Auschwitz. There they found only about 7,500 prisoners alive and a pile of corpses, the camp having been evacuated some time earlier, with the prisoners of Auschwitz and other camps being subjected to the infamous death marches. Among the skeletal figures behind the wire watching the approaching Soviet troops was Jewish author Primo Michele Levi: "They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene."[3]

Children pictured at Auschwitz following its liberation at about 15.00 hours on January 27, 1945. This image is in fact a still taken from footage shot by a film unit of the 1st Ukrainian Front.

Ivan Martynushkin was one of those Soviet soldiers: "Only the highest-ranking officers of the General Staff had perhaps heard of the camp. We knew nothing… It was hard to watch them. I remember their faces, especially their eyes which betrayed their ordeal."[4]

Some indication of the scale of the horrors that had been perpetrated at Auschwitz can be gleaned by some of the items found by the Soviet soldiers. These included 370,000 men's suits, 837,000 women's garments, 44,000 pairs of shoes and 7.7 tonnes of human hair.

There could, though, be little time for reflection at the misdeeds of the Germans for there was still a war to be won and it was the 1st Ukrainian Front which

A pair of Mistels pictured on their way to their target in February 1945. (NARA)

A number of *Mistels* on the airfield at Bernburg after an attack by aircraft of the US Eighth Air Force. The top two examples have been destroyed in the Allied attack, whilst the one nearest the camera is minus its control aircraft. (NARA)

overran Upper Silesia, and with it the Silesian industrial region. The other great industrial region, the Ruhr, had been under bombardment by the RAF and the USAAF day and night for years, and the Silesian armaments factories had played an increasingly important part in maintaining the German war effort. The German troops were now fighting only with the weapons they had at their disposal and in many cases just the guns they held in their hands.

BATTLE OF THE BRIDGEHEADS

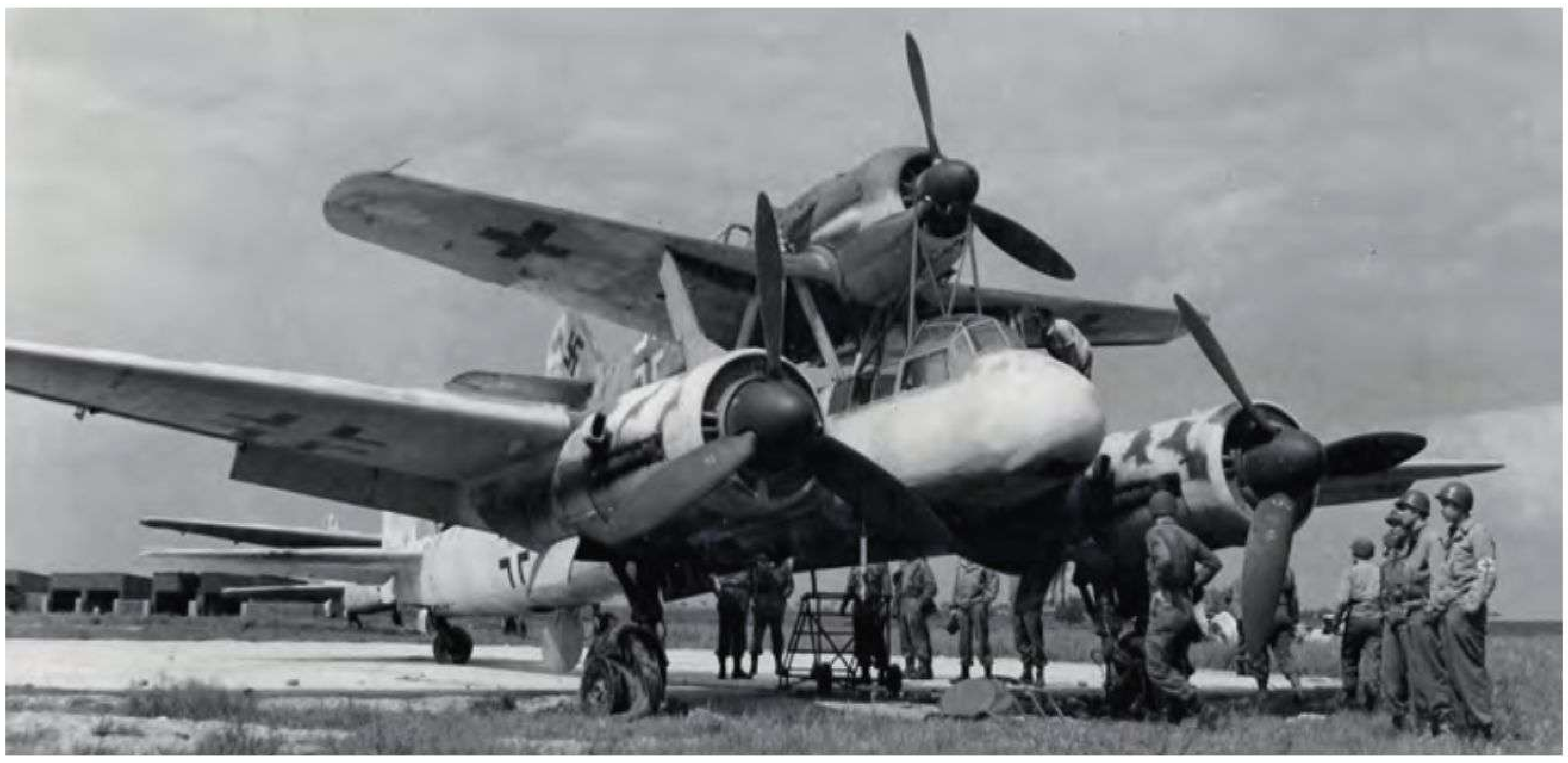
The Red Army had already gained a foothold on the west bank of the Oder, just 43 miles from Berlin, on the last day of January. It was vital for the Germans that these and other crossing points were destroyed as quickly as possible and for this they looked to technology, in the form of the *Mistel*. This was a modified, crewless Junkers Ju 88 bomber with a specially designed nose packed with a large load of explosives. On top of the bomber was either a Focke-Wulf Fw 190 or a Messerschmitt Bf 109, the fighter being attached to the Ju 88 by struts. The combination would be flown to its target by the pilot in the fighter; at which point the unmanned bomber was released to hit its target and explode, leaving the fighter free to return to base. The first attempt to use the *Mistel* was on March 8, 1945, when four machines targeted bridges near Göritz. Two hit their targets. Subsequent efforts were less successful, and more conventional methods were employed instead.

The panzer divisions, which began arriving on the Oder on January 31, went immediately into action. Though they were able to drive back some of the Soviet bridgeheads, others sprang up. For the next few days, the Germans tried to destroy the bridgeheads while the Soviets endeavoured to expand them and link them together. With the Luftwaffe free to roam the skies over the river, the Red Army suffered terrible losses.

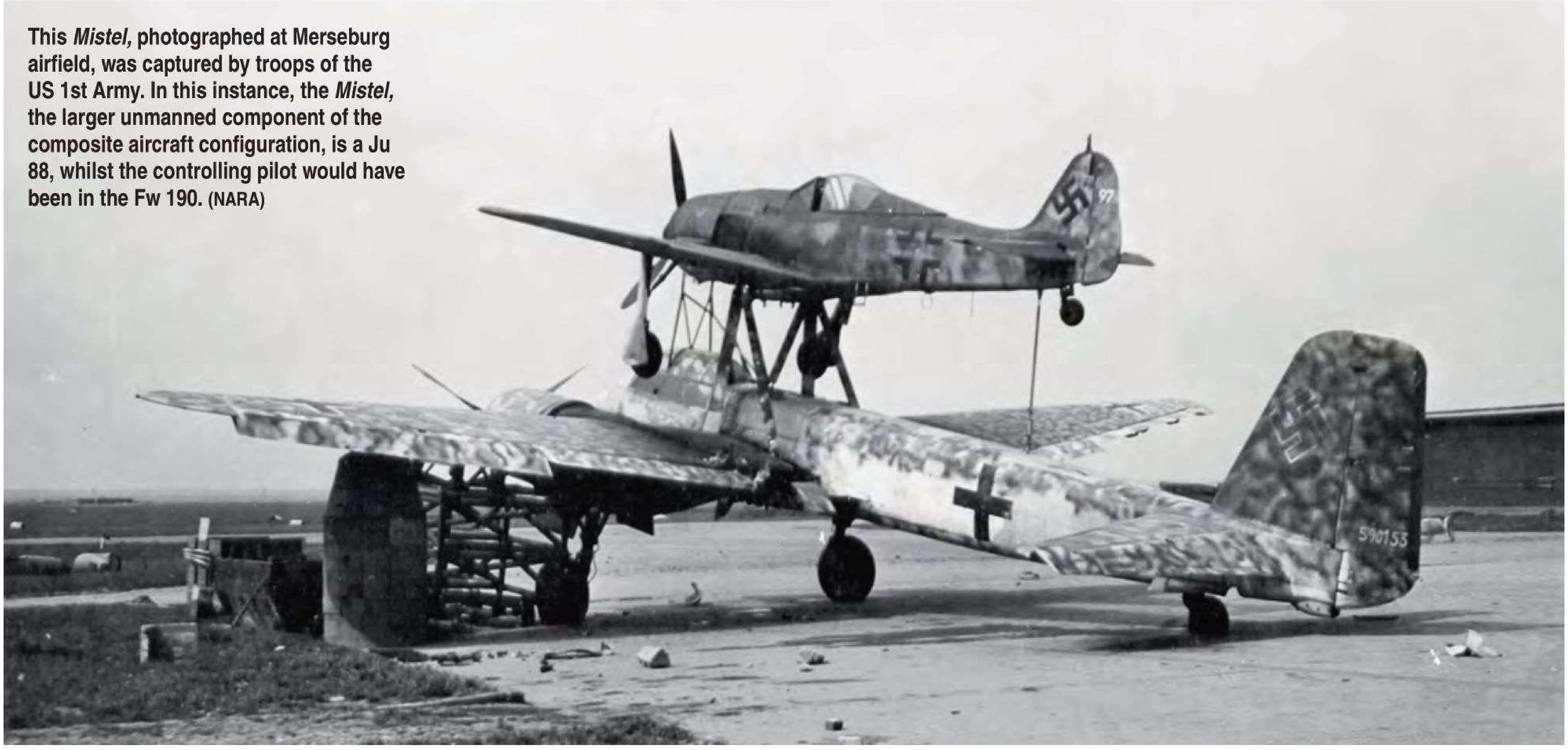
Fighting was severe, and it was simply impossible for the Germans to hold back the Soviets at every crossing point. Using mortars and artillery from the east bank, the Soviets were able to bombard the Germans who had few guns of their own to return fire.

The situation became so desperate for Himmler's outmatched divisions, battalions of the Volkssturm, the German Home Guard, were pushed into the gaps in the German line. Unlike the British Home Guard, which had been under arms and well trained since the beginning of the war, the Volkssturm had only been formed on October 18, 1944. It was generally ill-trained and poorly equipped. Predictably, its men could do little to resist the Red Army.

In the first two months of 1945 losses on both sides had been severe. Not counting those who had been wounded, more than half a million Soviets troops had been killed or captured, but the battles had cost the Ostheer 400,000 of its own men, a far greater proportion than the Red Army had suffered.[5] Air cover from the Luftwaffe had also been lost, with fighter aircraft having been redeployed to combat the bombers of the RAF and USAAF following the bombing of Dresden on February 13-15 in which a firestorm had all but destroyed the city. Other German aircraft eventually found



US troops examine another captured *Mistel* combination at Bernburg at the end of the war in Europe. A surviving Fw 190 control fighter is on display in the RAF Museum's Cosford site. Captured by British troops in 1945, this aircraft, werke nummer 733682, retains the *Kugelverschraubung mit Sprengbolzen* fittings, the ball joints with explosive bolts, that attached it to the *Mistel* below. (NARA)



This *Mistel,* photographed at Merseburg airfield, was captured by troops of the US 1st Army. In this instance, the *Mistel,* the larger unmanned component of the composite aircraft configuration, is a Ju 88, whilst the controlling pilot would have been in the Fw 190. (NARA)

Reichsführer der SS Heinrich Himmler addresses members of the East Prussian Volkssturm battalions, which were the first to take up arms, in late October 1944. (Bundesarchiv; Bild 146-1987-128-10/Falkowski/CC-BY-SA 3.0)

A Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress of the US Eighth Air Force about to release its bombs on the German port of Swinemünde, in support of Marshal Zhukov's Red Army forces which were just sixteen miles away, on March 12, 1945. (NARA)

themselves left impotent on their airfields, grounded because of a lack of aviation fuel.

Fuel shortages were also hampering the ground forces. Hitler became so concerned about the situation on the Oder that on March 3 he made a surprise visit to the 9th Army, only the second time in the entire war that he had visited a front-line unit. The visit did little good, of course. All Hitler could do was encourage his troops to hold their ground and fight on. Strength of will, he maintained, would win in the end.

The Führer's insistence that there should be no retreat, regardless of any tactical considerations, was proving, quite literally, fatal, as Major von Lösecke commanding officer of the 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment later sorrowfully wrote: "During the night attacks of 24 and 27 March, first the 3rd Battalion and then the 2nd Battalion of the 90th Panzergrenadier Regiment sustained very high losses of officers, NCOs and men. The loss of so many brave soldiers was lamentable, but especially painful was the loss of irreplaceable leaders. Each failure shattered the confidence of the troops. The responsibility for this was not to be found at Division or Corps, but rather at the highest level, where at their map tables they often no longer felt any responsibility towards the fighting soldiers. If one complained about this, the only answer that came was: 'Führer's orders!'"[6]

DEUTSCHER VOLKSSTURM
WEHRMACHT

An armband worn by a member of the Volkssturm in the final months of the war in Europe. (Historic Military Press)

Nevertheless, Zhukov's decision to delay his final advance on Berlin until the German armies holding out in Königsberg and Posen had been eliminated gave Hitler the chance to consolidate his positions around the capital. But Hitler had finally acknowledged that defeat was imminent, issuing his shocking Nerobefehl, or 'Nero Decree' on March 19. This ordered that "All military transport and communication facilities, industrial establishments and supply depots, as well as anything else of value within Reich territory, which could in any way be used by the enemy immediately or within the foreseeable future for the prosecution of the war, will be destroyed."[7]

Hitler saw the end of the Third Reich as the end of the German nation. "If the war is lost," he declared, "then the people too is lost". How wrong he would prove to be.

Russian infantrymen advancing against German positions on the Eastern Front. (Historic Military Press)

NOTES:

1. Evgeni Bessonov, *Tank Rider, Into the Reich with the Red Army* (Frontline, Barnsley, 2017), p.181.
2. Traudl Junge, *Until the Final Hour* (Phoenix, London, 2003), p.144.
3. Primo Levi, *If This is a Man and The Truce*, (Abacus, London, 2001), p.188.
4. Thibault Marchand, 'Soviet veteran recounts horrors of Auschwitz liberation', *The Times of Israel*, 25 January 2015.
5. Brian Taylor, *Barbarossa to Berlin, Volume Two, The Defeat of Germany, 19 November 1942 to 15 May 1945* (Spellmount, Stroud, 2004), p.291.
6. Quoted in Tony Le Tissier, *Marshal Zhukov at the Oder, The Decisive Battle for Berlin* (Sutton, Stroud, 2008), p.44.
7. Hugh R. Trevor Roper (Ed), *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler's War Directives 1939–1945* (Holt Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1971) pp. 206–207.

WAR AND PEACE: THE YALTA CONFERENCE

The fate, and future, of the countries of Europe and its tens of millions of people lay in the hands of just three men – Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin.

With the Soviet armies massed on the River Oder poised to launch their assault upon Berlin, and the American and British armies ready to recommence their advance beyond the Rhine, the outcome of the war was beyond doubt. But exactly what policy should be adopted by the Allies after the war had yet to be determined. Likewise, the arrangements for how to deal with Germany and the other Axis countries after their inevitable, and no doubt chaotic, defeat needed to be agreed. There was, therefore, much for the 'Big Three' to discuss when, on February 4, 1945, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin met in the Crimean Black Sea coastal resort of Yalta.

The first, and most contentious, issue to be raised, was that of Roosevelt's dream of creating a world peace organisation which would recognise the sovereign rights of all nations. With Stalin set on acquiring as much territory as possible for the Soviet Union, this was never going to be accepted by him. "The three Great Powers which had borne the brunt of the war," Stalin insisted, "should be the ones to preserve the peace". He made it abundantly clear that he would "never agree to having any action of any of the Great Powers submitted to the judgement of the small powers".[1]

Prior to the previous meeting between the three leaders, in Tehran in 1943, it had been agreed that after the war Germany should be completely dismantled and should pay reparations for the damage she had inflicted on the Allied nations, despite the obvious contradiction of these competing objectives. The partitioning of Germany had also been discussed, though actual demarcation zones had not been defined, though the partitioning of Berlin had been mapped out in November 1944. At Yalta the three leaders confirmed their demand that Germany should surrender unconditionally, and, for the first time, the Anglo-American and Soviet Chiefs of Staff discussed the actual measures they would adopt to bring about the swift defeat of Germany.

There was, though, no such unanimity concerning the occupation of Germany after the war – who got what would determine the shape of post-war Europe. It was the

"The three Great Powers which had borne the brunt of the war should be the ones to preserve the peace."

The aircraft that transported Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Crimea pictured on Saki aerodrome. It is Churchill's Avro York, LV633, that can be seen in the foreground, with Roosevelt's Douglas C-54 beyond. The York, named *Ascalon*, was one of Avro's prototypes which was converted to serve as the Prime Minister's personal transport and flying conference room. (NARA)

Russian view that there should only be three occupying powers and that France should not be included. Stalin urged Churchill and Roosevelt to settle this issue there and then at Yalta. The end of the war was not far off and there would not be any further opportunities to discuss the topic before Berlin fell.

Stalin wanted the Reich to be partitioned into a number of separate states and stated that a declaration to that effect should be inserted in the surrender terms. He also felt that Germany should be deprived of 80% of her heavy industry and should pay reparations in kind to the value of $20bn, half of which should go to the Soviet Union. Clearly, Stalin had learned nothing from the consequences of the similarly harsh treatment meted out to Germany in the Versailles Treaty after the First World War, which had helped thrust Hitler into power.

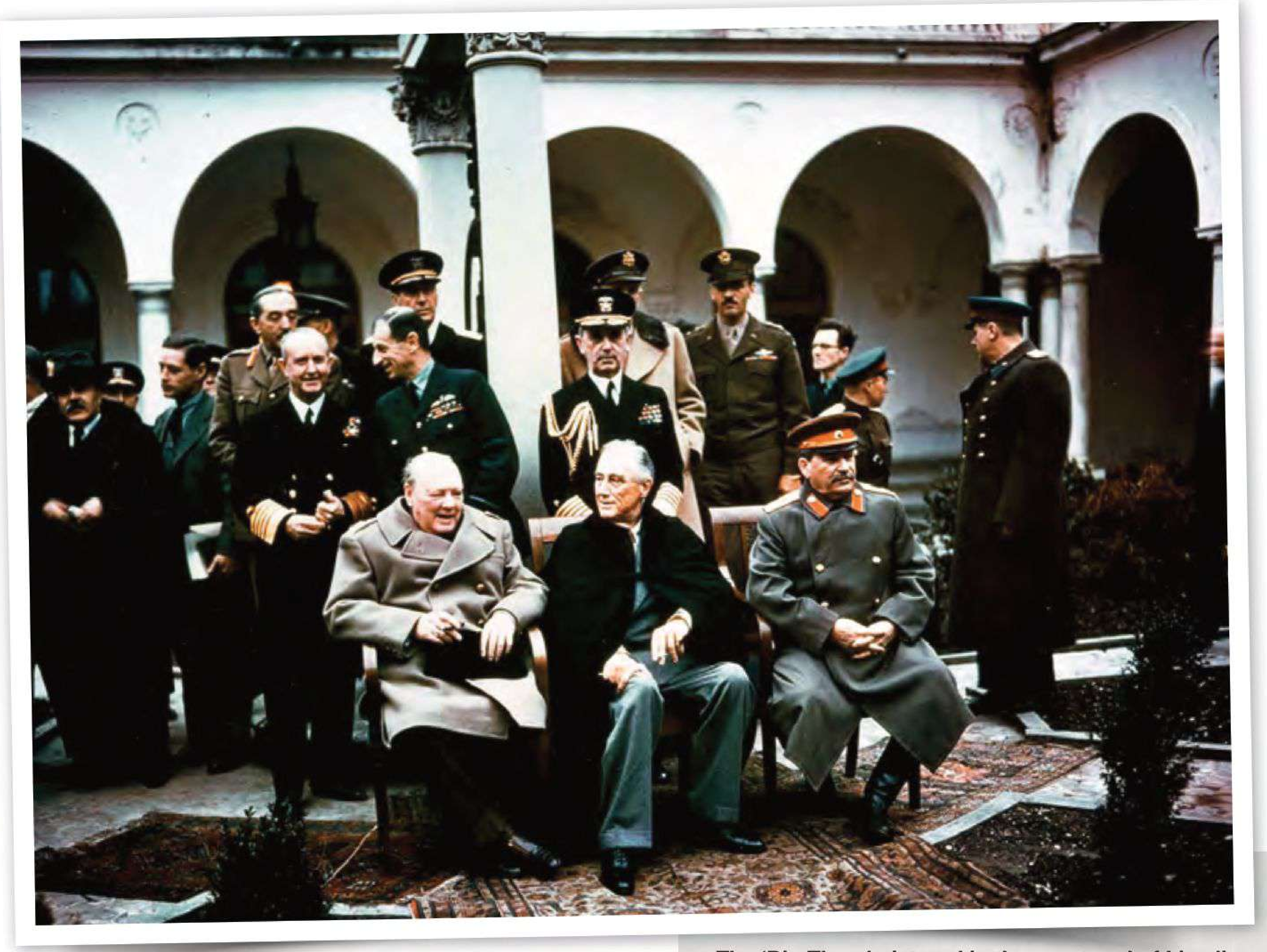
Churchill, meanwhile, wanted France to share in the occupation, hoping that having a second Western European country involved in post-war Germany would help balance the strength of the Soviet Union. If Stalin was forgetting the lessons of Versailles, then Churchill was ignoring the antipathy de Gaulle harboured against the UK, which would later be demonstrated with the French President's refusal to allow Britain to join the Common Market.

The subject of Poland was another matter discussed at great length. Stalin delivered a passionate, and convincing, explanation of his nation's position: "For the Russian people, Poland is not only a question of honour but also a question of security… Throughout history Poland has been the corridor through which the enemy has passed into Russia… It is in Russia's interests that Poland should be strong and powerful, in a position to shut the door of this corridor by her own force."

The outcome was a mixed one with regard to Poland's future. Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to the Soviet Union keeping most of the territory it had seized in 1939, the Poles being granted areas of eastern Germany in compensation. That territory, Stalin suggested, should extend as far as the River Neisse, ie almost all of Silesia. This was something Churchill was greatly worried about as those territories were, of course, heavily populated by Germans. "It would

Churchill and Roosevelt at Saki having flown in for the Yalta Conference. (NARA)

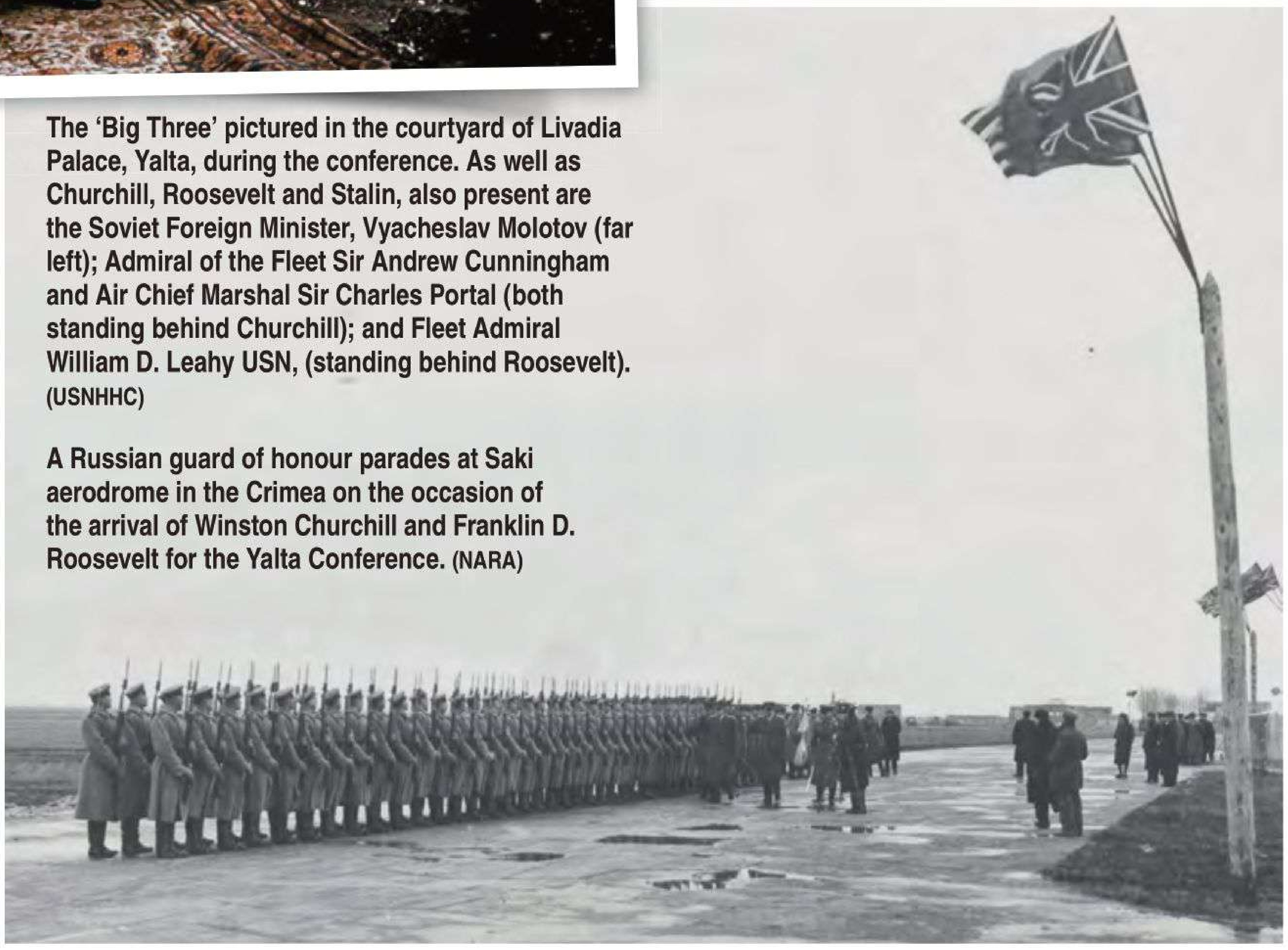
Churchill makes his way towards Roosevelt's aircraft to greet the US President on the latter's arrival at Saki. (NARA)



The ‘Big Three’ pictured in the courtyard of Livadia Palace, Yalta, during the conference. As well as Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, also present are the Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov (far left); Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham and Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal (both standing behind Churchill); and Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy USN, (standing behind Roosevelt). (USNHHC)

be a pity,” he remarked, “to stuff the Polish goose so full of German food that he will die of indigestion”.

There was a further difficulty in that there was a Polish Government in Exile in London, and a Communist one placed in Warsaw by the Soviets. Naturally, Churchill supported the former and Stalin the latter. However, the war in the Pacific still raged, and Roosevelt wanted the Soviet Union’s help in defeating Japan. He did not want the Polish question to be divisive. So, most of Stalin’s demands were met, or at least not opposed. The reality was that Poland and much of eastern Germany was already in Soviet hands and there was little Britain and the USA could do other than try to moderate Stalin’s demands. In response to having had his way over Poland, Stalin consented to French participation in the occupation.



A Russian guard of honour parades at Saki aerodrome in the Crimea on the occasion of the arrival of Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt for the Yalta Conference. (NARA)

The imposing façade of the Livadia Palace, a former summer retreat of the last Tsar in which the Yalta Conference took place. (Shutterstock) INSET: The White Hall in Livadia Palace. This was the conference room in which the Yalta Conference was held. (Shutterstock)

SQUARING THE OCTAGON

If there were differences on the political questions, there was a degree of unanimity on the more immediate military concerns. The war, after all, still had to be won. The decision of the Allied leaders to persist with their demand for Germany’s unconditional surrender made it certain that the Germans would fight to the very end, and that the end would only come when the Red Army and the US and British forces met in the heart of the Reich. But just where that meeting would take place remained ill-defined.

At the Second Quebec Conference in September 1944, codenamed *Octagon*, it had been accepted that the Soviet Union would be allowed to occupy the whole of eastern Germany. Actual plans for the areas to be controlled by Britain and the USA were as follows: “The British forces… will occupy Germany west of the Rhine and east of the Rhine north of the line from Koblenz, following the northern border of Hesse and Nassau to the border of the area allocated to the Soviet Government. The forces of the United States… will occupy Germany east of the Rhine south of the line, Koblenz-northern border of Hesse-Nassau and west of the area allocated to the Soviet Government.”[2] These arrangements were confirmed at Yalta.

With the Red Army less than 50 miles from Berlin and the US and British armies more than 300 miles away, there was every likelihood, however, that the “area allocated to the Soviet Government” might simply be that occupied by the Soviet forces, which could well include Berlin. It was essential, therefore, that the Western Allies progressed their invasion of Germany as rapidly as possible, and that their drive on Berlin should be made without delay.

NOTES:

1. Chester Wilmot, *The Second World War, The Struggle for Europe* (Reprint Society, London, 1954), p.718.
2. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol.VI, Triumph and Tragedy* (Cassell, London, 1954), pp.141-2.

BREECHING THE LAST BARRIER

In protracted and bloody fighting, British, American and Canadian troops broke through the defences of the much-vaunted Siegfried Line and finally reached the banks of the River Rhine.

Much had happened on the Western Front since the US First Army had entered Germany and seized the city of Aachen. In the third week of September 1944, Operation *Market-Garden* had been undertaken in an ambitious attempt to capture intact bridges over the River Maas and the Lower Rhine and open the way into northern Germany. It proved a disastrous, if heroic, failure.

Then, in December, Hitler had surprised the Americans with an attack in the Ardennes, the famous Battle of the Bulge, which failed in its objective – that of destroying the Allied armies and driving the British and Americans to the bargaining table. All it really did was weaken Germany still further with losses in men, machines and fuel the Wehrmacht could ill afford.

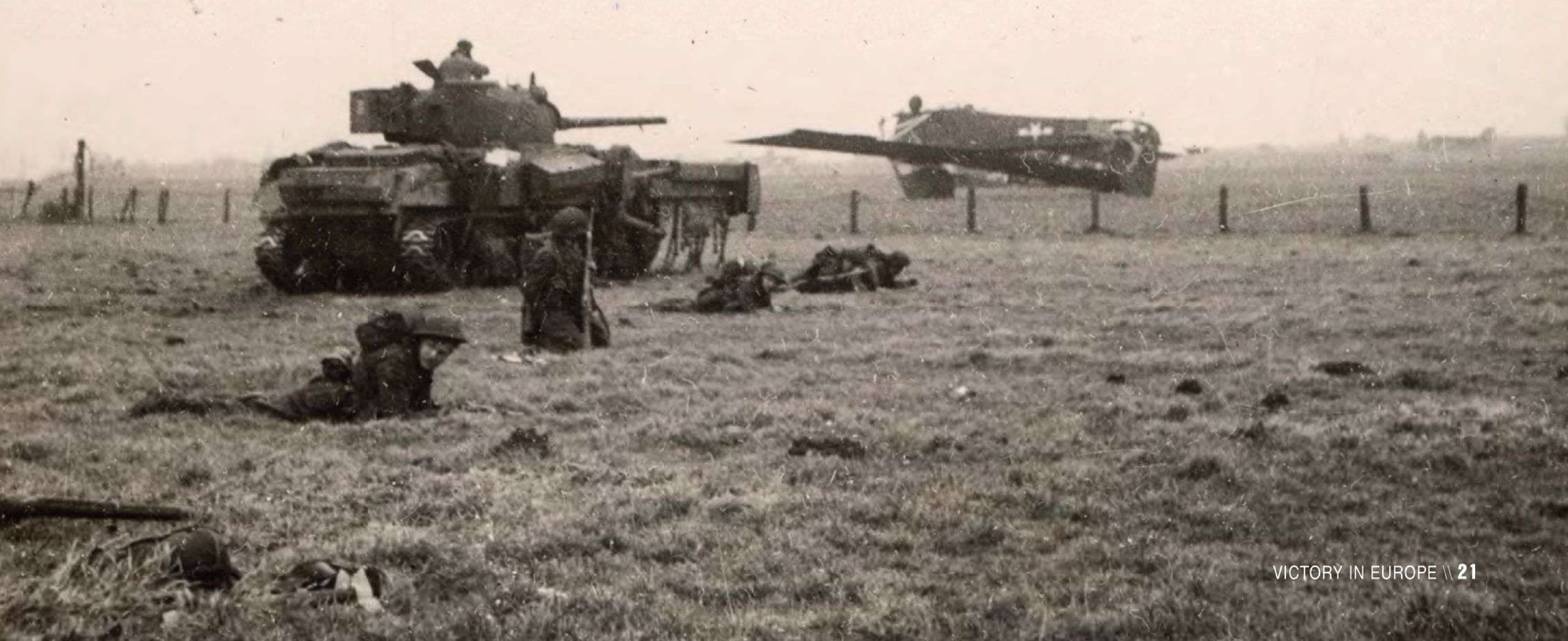
With the New Year, plans for the advance into Germany were reconsidered. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe, commanded 91 British, American and Canadian divisions, totalling more than 4 million men, and he aimed to use this vast force on as broad a front as possible. What he and his armies faced was the Siegfried Line, upon which Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt placed his hopes of defending the Reich. The force at his disposal was no greater than 1.5 million strong. Those 1.5 million men were told that: "The Siegfried Line and each of its defensive fortresses will be held to the last round and until completely destroyed." It is interesting to note that the phrase used by Wilck at Aachen – that of fighting to 'the last man', which had not been the case – had been modified by von Rundstedt to the more realistic instruction to 'the last round'.

The Siegfried Line was not uniformly solid throughout its length. It was at its strongest along the River Saar where it faced the French border and the main fortifications of the Maginot Line. It was at its weakest along its northerly limits, consisting of just a series of isolated bunkers and field works. But when the Allies crossed the Seine in August 1944, engineers and construction troops were rushed to the Line to renovate and restore what was Germany's last chance of stopping the Allies.

BATTLE OF THE REICHSWALD

Eisenhower's plan for the invasion of Germany involved a strike in the north by Montgomery's British and Canadian divisions. When all the Germans reserves were moved to oppose this threat, the US 9th Army would swing northwards, trapping the Germans 'in a vice'. Rundstedt would then have to decide either to fight it out on the west bank of the Rhine, in which case his divisions were certain to be crushed by the overwhelming weight of the Allied forces, or withdraw across the Rhine with the Allies on his heels. In the chaos of a retreat, the Germans would be unable to hold back the Allies who would have then achieved their main initial objective of crossing the Rhine and breaking into the open country of the north German plain beyond.

A Sherman flail tank supports infantry of the 2nd Battalion Glasgow Highlanders at the start of Operation *Veritable*, February 8, 1945. On the far side of the fence is the wreckage of an American Waco glider which landed during Operation *Market Garden* in September the previous year.
(Historic Military Press)



Sherman tanks of Montgomery's Anglo-Canadian 21st Army Group assemble for the start of Operation *Veritable*, February 8, 1945. *Veritable* was the northern part of an Allied pincer movement that took place between February 8 and March 11, 1945 during the final stages of the Second World War. The operation was part of a 'broad front' strategy to occupy the entire west bank of the Rhine before its crossing. **(Historic Military Press)**

The success of the operation, according to General Brian Horrocks of the British XXX Corps, which had been placed under the command of General 'Harry' Crerar's Canadian First Army for what was code-named *Veritable*: "… depended on two things. First, obtaining complete surprise, and secondly on the weather. If the Germans got wind of our attack, they would move up their reserves before the battle started. But the weather exerted the biggest influence of all, because the ground was frozen hard, and if only the frost would hold until 9 February, our tanks would be able to go everywhere across country… I had no doubt at all that under these conditions we should break out very quickly into the plain beyond and I hoped secretly to bounce one of the bridges over the Rhine." It would indeed be one of nature's elements that had a major influence on the operation, but one harnessed by the enemy.

Horrocks though, was certainly right about the weather. *Veritable* opened on the night of February 7, 1945, with a heavy raid by the RAF on the towns of Kleve and Goch which had been incorporated into the Siegfried Line. The fortifications of the Line were pounded by more than 1,000 guns in what was the British Army's largest artillery bombardment since the Battle of El Alamein.

The following morning XXX Corps launched the Allied attack. Then it started to rain. And it rained for eight days. "The battlefield has become practically a naval action," wrote R W Thompson of the *Sunday Times*. "The tops of houses, the turrets of derelict tanks, smitten tree trunks and branches or telegraph poles and all the fearful garbage of war gave shape to all this desolation of water. Otherwise it might almost have been at sea."

It was the element of water which created the next problem for the Allies. There were seven dams on the River Roer which ran through the Siegfried Line. German engineers opened the control valves on the dams, releasing a steady and powerful stream of water which swamped the flood plain of the Roer to a height of more than two feet. This stopped the US 9th Army dead in its tracks, meaning that the Allied vice could not be closed. The Canadians and XXX Corps found themselves left to face the Germans on their own.

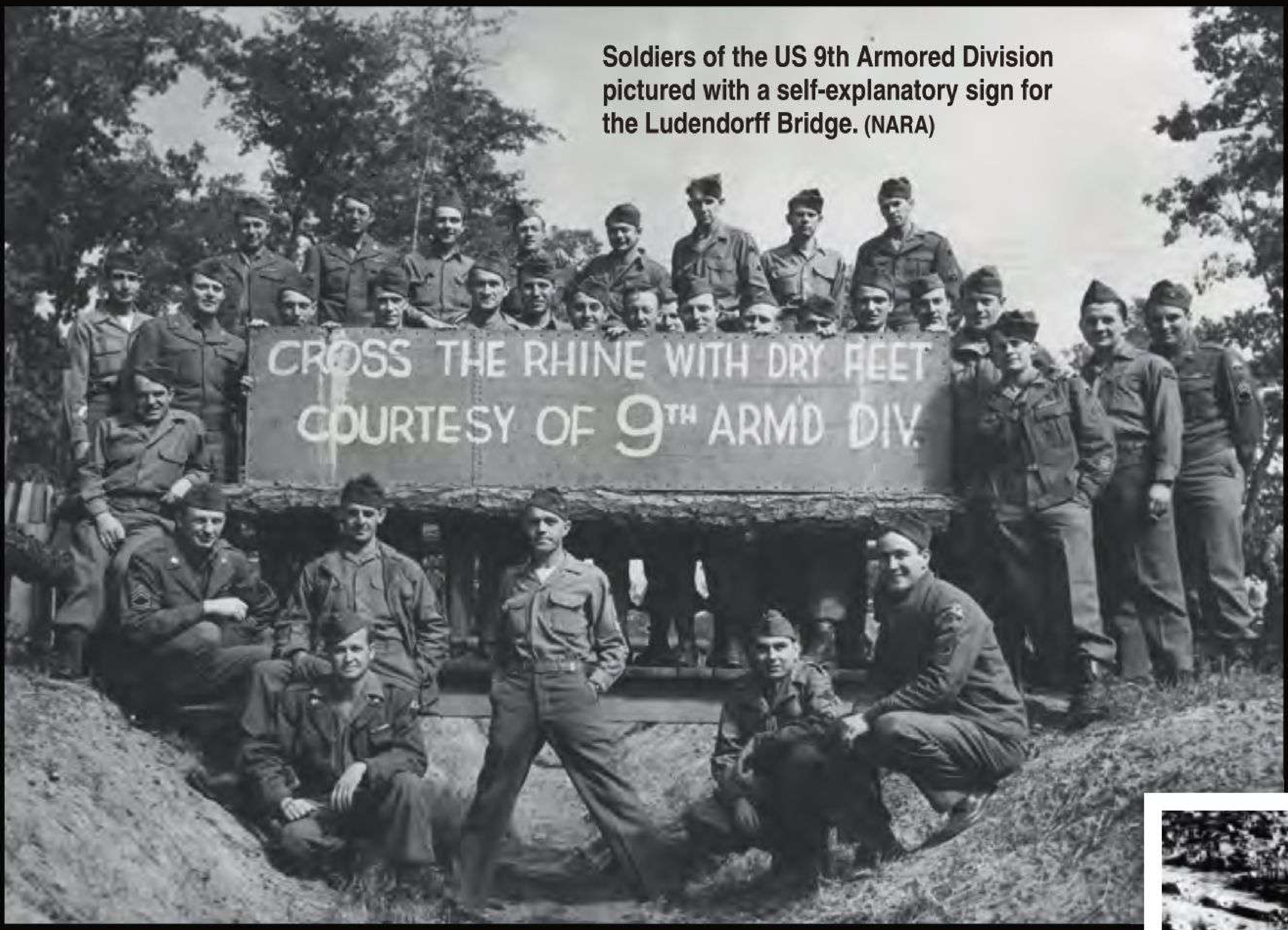
The battle became a slogging match as Horrock's divisions fought their way through the Reichswald Forest, a very large wooded area between the Rhine and Meuse and the Dutch/German border. The Germans employed their well-tried tactics of giving ground under pressure but then immediately launching counter attacks to recover the lost ground before the attackers could consolidate their successes. When that happened, infantry companies, which had been badly weakened in the initial assault, were often cut off and assailed from all sides. The Allies, though, were simply too well supported with hundreds of tanks and specialised armoured vehicles, including the famous Hobart's 'Funnies'.

A Valentine Mk.XI Royal Artillery OP tank (on the left) and a Churchill tank (on the right heading towards the camera) in Goch, February 21, 1945.

Hitler, as might be expected, instructed Rundstedt that he could not withdraw behind the Rhine and that he would have to fight where he stood. This threw away any possibility of an ordered retirement.

Horrocks described how the defences of the Siegfried Line, consisting of anti-tank ditches, mine-fields, concrete emplacements and barbed-wire entanglements, which ran north to south through the forest, were tackled by the 44th Brigade of the 15th Scottish Division: "The leading wave of the assault consisted of tanks with flails in front beating and exploding mines to clear passages through the mine-fields. Then came tanks carrying bridges and fascines on their backs to form

US infantry passing through the Siegfried Line, 1945. **(NARA)**


CROSS THE RHINE WITH DRY FEET
COURTESY OF 9TH ARMD DIV.

Soldiers of the US 9th Armored Division pictured with a self-explanatory sign for the Ludendorff Bridge. (NARA)

bridges over the anti-tank ditch. The next echelon was flame-throwing tanks to deal with the concrete pill-boxes, and finally infantry in cut-down tanks, i.e. with the top taken off, called Kangaroos."

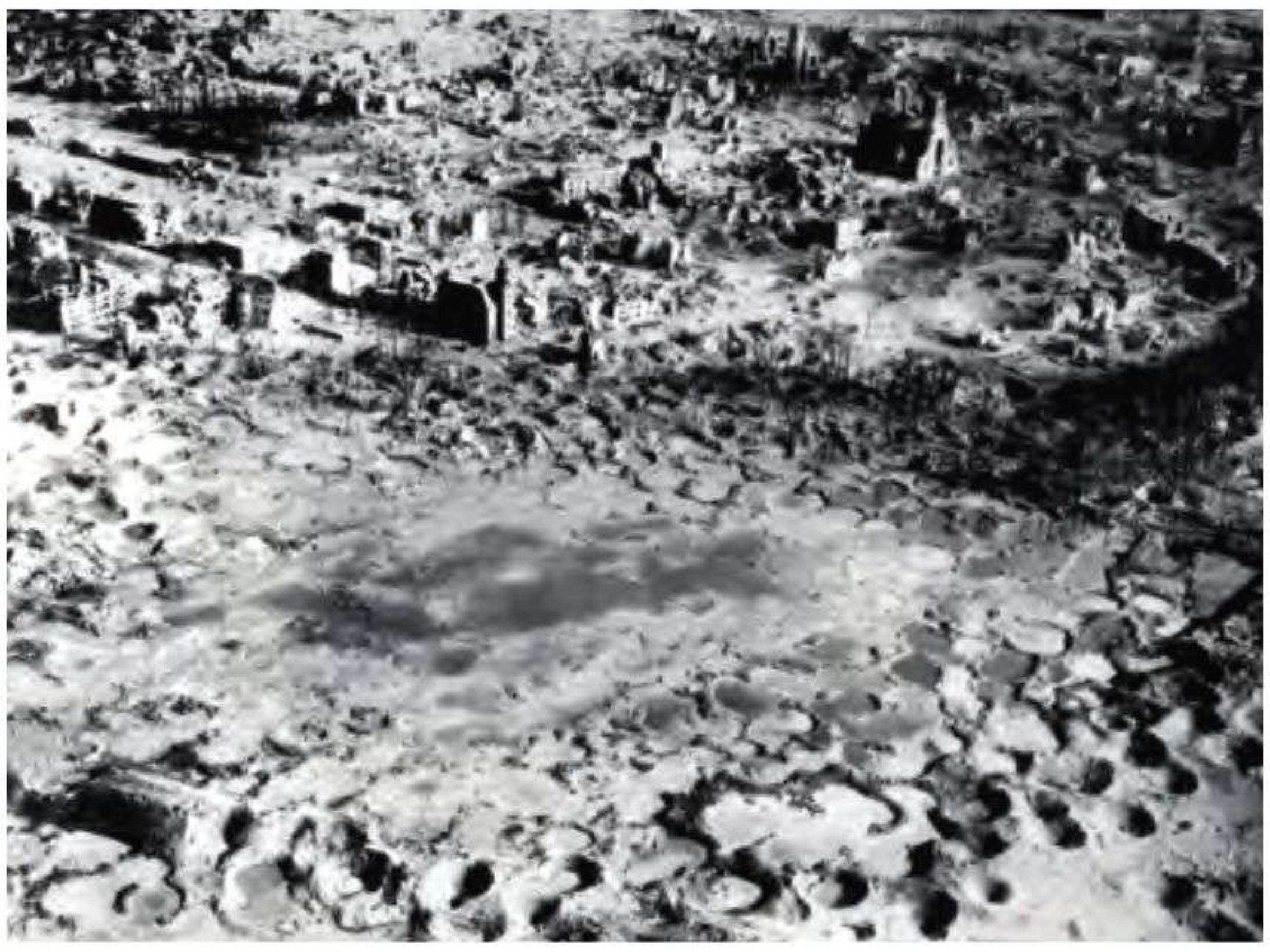
THE BATTLE FOR GOCH

Kleve was taken on February 11, the Germans fighting ferociously in the ruins of that historical old town, birthplace of one of Henry VIII's wives. The next objective was Goch which formed the western cornerstone of the Siegfried Line.

Garrisoned by the 180th and 190th infantry divisions and the 2nd Fallschirmjäger Division, the Germans put up a 'staggering' defence of the town. They were aided by the rubble of the ruined houses which provided excellent defensive positions, as well as blocking the streets to the Allied tanks. The town was not taken until February 21, the official end of Operation *Veritable.*

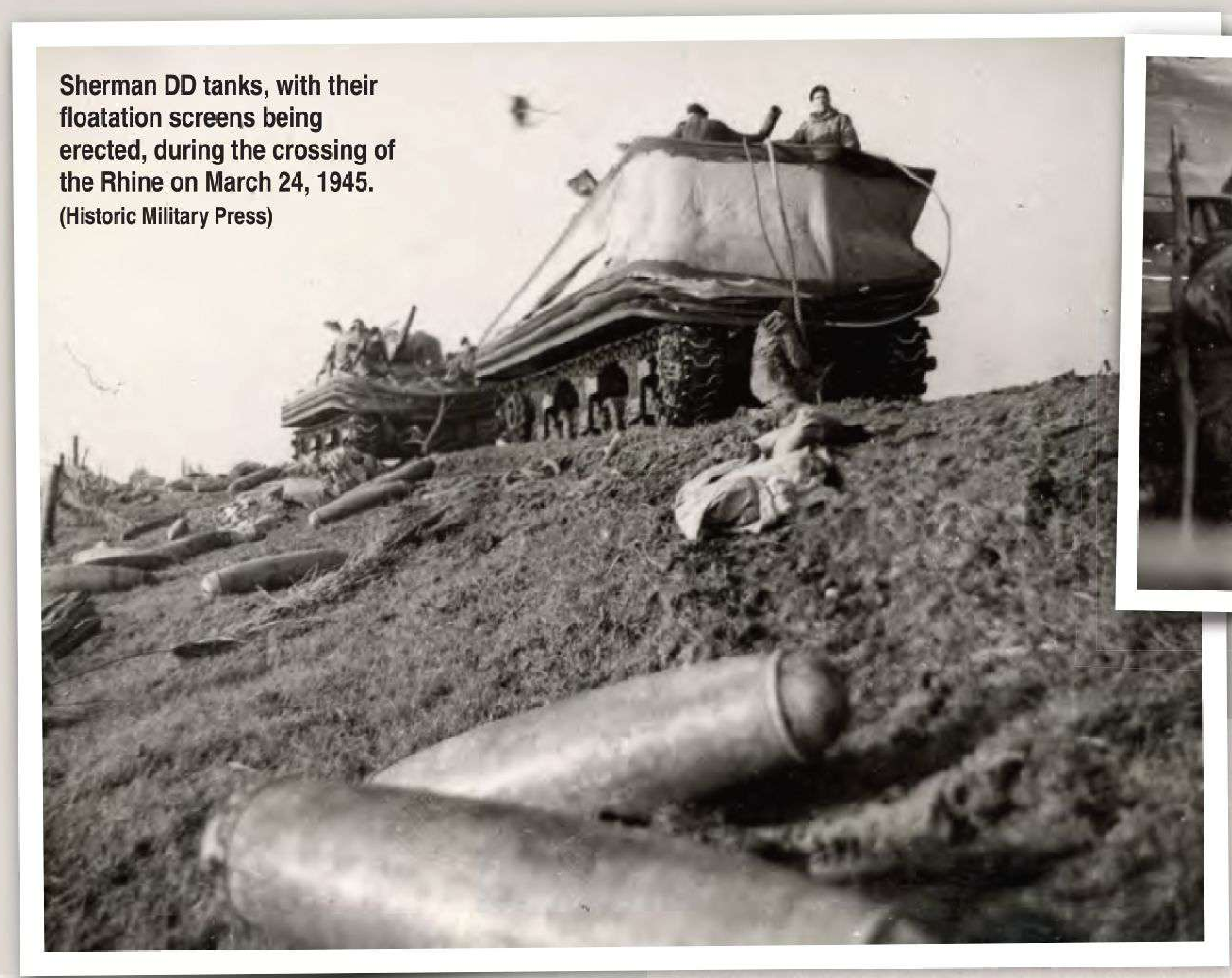
The pillboxes of the Siegfried Line had proven to be death traps for the unfortunate troops destined to defend them. AVRE (Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers) Churchill tanks with 40lb bombards would blow out the steel shutters, then a Crocodile flame-thrower tank would squirt unignited fuel into the structure for 30 seconds, followed by a single burst of ignited fuel. The men inside were incinerated.

As so often had been the case, Hitler's ill-judged 'no retreat' order proved disastrous, as one German soldier, Otto Damm, related: "We were caught because we had nowhere to retreat to, because we were by the River Maas – and the attack came from the front. So, we either had to swim the freezing river or get captured. No one wanted to swim – so we surrendered. At 12pm I was sitting



Having previously been a target for the Allied air forces, by virtue of its importance as a crossing point of the Rhine, the artillery of the bombardment of Wesel, in preparation for the commencement of Operation *Varsity*, began on March 23, 1945. Some 3,000 guns completed the town's destruction, thought further aerial attacks were also made on the night of March 23/24. By the time it was captured, 97% of the town had been destroyed. (US National Archives)

Some of the first US troops across the Ludendorff bridge rest in the Erpeler Ley tunnel, on the eastern side of the Rhine), on March 11,1945. Note the knocked out jeeps in the foreground. (NARA)



Sherman DD tanks, with their floatation screens being erected, during the crossing of the Rhine on March 24, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

British troops beside a damaged Waco glider during Operation *Varisty.* (Historic Military Press)

in a cellar with my comrades – luckily our camp commandant spoke English, when we surrendered. We were told to leave all our weapons in the cellar and put our hands up."[1]

BLOCKBUSTER

Horrock's XXX Corps suffered more than 10,000 casualties in taking the Reichswald and the Canadians more than 5,000. Though the Allies had advanced between 15 and 20 miles into enemy territory, the Germans still maintained an unbroken line. Before them the Canadians now faced the Hockwald, another dense forest. They also faced General der Fallschirmtruppe Alfred Schlemm's 1st Parachute Army, eight divisions strong, standing ahead of the Rhine. Hitler needed the barges to continue to sail up the Rhine from the factories of the Ruhr and Schlemm was ordered to hold the Rhine and not to destroy any of the nine bridges extant over the river without the Führer's express permission.

British Airborne troops amongst the wreckage of a glider on the edge of a landing zone near the town of Hamminkeln, one of the two villages the 6th Airborne was tasked with capturing – the other being Schnappenberg – as well as clear part of the Diersfordter Wald and secure three bridges over the River Issel. (Historic Military Press)

"We were told to leave all our weapons in the cellar and put our hands up."

Airborne troops drive a Jeep out of a Horsa glider during operations east of the Rhine. Launched on March 24, 1945, Operation *Varsity* was the largest airborne operation in history to be conducted on a single day and in one location. (Historic Military Press)

An armada of USAAF tugs and gliders pictured as Operation *Varsity* begins on the morning of March 24, 1945. (US National Archives)

Paratroopers advance through the town of Hamminkeln during airborne landings east of the Rhine. (Historic Military Press)

The water had had finally receded along the Roer and the US 9th Army was now able to move northwards. They linked up with the British and Canadians in what was now Operation *Blockbuster*.

General William Hood Simpson's men launched their assault on February 23 against the weakened German 15th Army, as Crerar's and Horrock's divisions pushed into the Hockwald. During what Eisenhower called "some of the fiercest fighting of the war", two Canadians were to be awarded the Victoria Cross. The first of these was on the night of February 25/26, when two companies of The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada led a series of attacks on German strongholds. During the attack, heavy enemy fire took down Sergeant Aubrey Cosens' platoon and all but four other men. Rather than pull back, Cosens continued with the attack. He ran forward alone to a tank and, putting himself at the front of the turret, he directed its gunfire onto the German positions.

The Germans tried to counter-attack but were driven back. Cosens then told the tank commander to ram some farm buildings into which the Germans attackers had retreated. He went in alone, killing 22 of the defenders and taking the rest prisoner. He then dealt similarly with the occupants of two more buildings. Sadly, after surviving all this, he was shot by a German sniper as he returned to his unit to give his report.[2]

Progress was measured in little more than yards as day by day the British and Canadians battled their way through the Hochwald. On March 1, Captain Frederick Tilston of The Essex Scottish regiment, led 'C' Company in a 500-yard attack across muddy terrain soaked by recent rain and snow, through barbed wire and enemy automatic weapons fire. After being slightly wounded in the head by shell fragments, he personally destroyed one enemy machine-gun position with a hand grenade. He then led the men of 'C' Company on to a second line of German resistance, when he was wounded once more, this time in the hip. He struggled to his feet and led his men forward where the Essex Scottish overran the enemy positions with rifle butts, bayonets and knives in close hand-to-hand combat. Unlike Cosens, Fred Tilston lived to receive his Victoria Cross.

With the Americans moving up rapidly, von Rundstedt could see that his divisions were going to be cut off unless they withdrew quickly across the Rhine. But all withdrawals had to be approved by Hitler, and every delay cost von Rundstedt more men. Schlemm's Parachute Army found itself on the west bank of the Rhine in a dire situation defending a small area around the bridge at Wesel, not being allowed to pull back over the river.

"In this postage-stamp sector," wrote the historian Milton Shulman, "because of Hitler's mad refusal to permit the withdrawal of any fit men, there were jammed no less than nine divisions, three corps headquarters and an army headquarters. So crowded were these staffs that one sugar refinery alone housed the headquarters of three divisions. Here the troops who had fought an exhausting battle for a full month without a rest, were pounded relentlessly from the air and from the massed guns of the tireless Allied artillery."[3]

Finally, on March 6, Schlemm was granted permission to fall back across the Rhine. Operation *Blockbuster* concluded on March 10, with 9,284 American, 17,685 British and Canadian soldiers having become casualties. The Canadian First Army took 22,000 German prisoners and killed or seriously wounded 22,000 more. Including the losses inflicted by the US 9th Army (which lost 7,300 men, took 29,000 prisoners, and killed or seriously wounded 16,000 Germans during the Rhineland fighting) the Germans all told lost 90,000 men while inflicting 23,000 Allied casualties.[4]

The view from the cockpit of a Horsa glider during the airborne drop east of the Rhine, March 25, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

Gliders in a field outside Hamminkeln during airborne landings east of the Rhine, March 25, 1945. The glider nearest the camera, RJ246, is an Airspeed AS.51 Horsa I built by Harris Lebus. (Historic Military Press)

THE BRIDGE AT REMAGEN

All the efforts and sacrifices of von Rundstedt's troops were, tragically, to no avail, due to the confusion caused by Hitler's 'no retreat' policy and the ever-frequent command changes the German Army had to endure.

As the soldiers of the US 9th Army moved up to the Rhine, they were amazed to find that the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen was still intact. This was actually a railway bridge on which wooden planks were laid to allow the passage of motor vehicles. When Hitler finally relented and allowed his troops to fall back across the Rhine, Generalleutnant Walter Botsch, responsible for the Bonn-Remagen sector, discovered that the Ludendorff Bridge was held by just thirty-six infantrymen, a 125-strong company of engineers, a number of Hitler Youth, and 500 men of the Volkssturm. This poorly equipped force of men and boys, only around 1,000 strong, was all that stood in the way of the Americans.

Botsch sought to send reinforcements to the bridge, but these did not materialise. Then he was suddenly transferred to another sector, being moved so quickly that he did not have time to tell his successor, Generalmajor Richard von Bothmer, of the weakness of the defences at Remagen.

Von Bothmer did not visit Remagen, leaving that sector under the control of LXVII Corps' General der Kavallerie Edwin Rothkirch. In the midst of the mounting confusion, Rothkirch wandered into the path of the advancing Americans and was taken prisoner.

General der Infanterie Otto Hitzfeld was told in the early hours of March 7, 1945, that he was now in charge of LXVII Corps and therefore responsible for the Ludendorff Bridge. Hitzfeld sent his adjutant, Major Hans Scheller, with only eight men, to assume command of the defence of the bridge. Captain Willi Bratge, whose small contingent was holding the bridge, was, no doubt, aghast when Scheller turned up without the infantry battalion Bratge was expecting. What did turn up just two hours later was the American Combat Command B.

The structure had been prepared for demolition, but Scheller was reluctant to blow the bridge while there were still German troops on the west bank of the river trying to escape the clutches of the Americans. This presented Brigadier General William Hoge with an entirely unexpected opportunity. He knew that at any moment the Germans might destroy the bridge, and that if he ordered his men to storm the structure, they might be destroyed along with it. He hesitated for only a moment.

The rear fuselage section of a British Horsa glider straddles the railway line near Hamminkeln railway station, March 25, 1945. In the background a party of German prisoners can be seen under guard whilst waiting to be moved to the rear. (Historic Military Press)

An Achilles tank destroyer on the east bank of the Rhine links up with airborne forces whose abandoned Horsa gliders can be seen in the background, March 26, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

'RAN OUT ONTO THE BRIDGE'

Everett Holles was an NBC Radio war correspondent embedded with Hoge's men. He recorded an account of the American assault: "At 3:50 o'clock, a platoon led by Lieut. Emmett Burrows of New York City, sped down the slope to the bridge entrance. There was a flurry of shooting as the Germans, taken completely by surprise, scurried about trying to organize a defense. A German gun was knocked out, some German soldiers killed. Then the Yanks, crouching low against machine gun fire coming from the bridge towers, ran out onto the bridge."

Seemingly, the bridge was scheduled to be demolished at 16.00 hours, but as soon as the Americans reached it, the senior German engineer, Hauptmann Karl Friesenhahn, warning everyone to stand clear, turned the key intended to activate the electric circuit and set off the explosives. Nothing happened. He turned it again. Still nothing happened. Frantically Friesenhahn turned it a third time. Again, no response.

Realizing that the circuit was probably broken, Friesenhahn sought a repair team to move on to the bridge; but as machine-gun and tank fire from the Americans riddled the ground, he saw that not enough time remained to do the job that way. "He called for a volunteer to go onto the bridge and ignite the primer cord by hand," wrote the official US historian of the campaign. "When a sergeant responded, Friesenhahn himself went with him as far as the edge of the bridge and there waited anxiously while the sergeant, crouching to avoid shells and bullets, dashed onto the bridge.

"After what seemed an eternity, the sergeant started back toward the east bank at a run. Seemingly endless moments passed. Had the sergeant failed? Would the primer cord ignite the charge?

Regimental Sergeant-Major Evans of the 12th Devonshire Regiment examines captured German helmets in Hamminkeln, March 25, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

"At last, a sudden booming roar. Timbers flew wildly into the air. The bridge lifted as if to rise from its foundations. Cowering against the explosion, Friesenhahn breathed a sigh of relief. The job was done.

"Yet when he looked up again, the bridge was still there."

The Americans were equally amazed to find that they had not been blown to pieces, and so they raced on. "While we were running across the bridge," continued Everett Holles, "and, man, it may have been only 250 yards but it seemed like 250 miles to us, I spotted this lieutenant, standing out there completely exposed to the machine gun fire that was pretty heavy by this time.

"He was cutting wires and kicking the German demolition charges off the bridge with his feet! Boy that took plenty of guts. He's the one who saved the bridge and made the whole thing possible – the kinda guy I'd like to know."[5] The lieutenant had watched was John W. Mitchell.

Quickly, the Americans seized control of the bridge and, somewhat gingerly, began to remove the rest of the explosives. Having been told that the bridge was to be blown up at 16.00 hours, people from Remagen had gathered on vantage points on the east bank to watch the fireworks. But instead they witnessed American troops flowing across, and soon that flow became a flood – the Allies were across the Rhine.

Soldiers from the US 89th Infantry Division crouch down in their assault boat as it comes under enemy fire near the German town of Sankt Goar, on the west bank of the Middle Rhine, March 26, 1945. "I drew an assault boat to cross in – just my luck," recalled one US veteran. "We all tried to crawl under each other because the lead was flying around like hail." (NARA)

Hamminkeln
Kreis Rees
Reg-Bez. Düsseldorf

British Airborne troops pose beside a road sign outside Hamminkeln in the aftermath of the *Varsity* landings. (Historic Military Press)

THE LARGEST AIRBORNE OPERATION IN HISTORY

The importance of the bridge at Remagen cannot be overstated, and throughout the course of the following two weeks the Germans threw everything they could at the structure in a bid to demolish it. Similarly, the Americans moved every muscle and every anti-aircraft battery to hold onto this vital link across the Rhine.

As well as this unexpected opening, Montgomery had his own plan for seizing control of the Rhine as part of Eisenhower's broad front strategy. In Operation *Plunder* the leading units of the British 21st Army Group were to be ferried across the river on amphibious vehicles to form a defensive perimeter on the eastern bank behind which engineers would lay pontoon bridges to allow supporting regiments to join the attack. To aid the ground forces, two airborne divisions would also be dropped on the east bank of the Rhine to support and strengthen the amphibious operation.

British Airborne troops offer water to German prisoners from a Luftwaffe field division during the Rhine crossing operations, March 24-25, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

This operation bore much resemblance to the failed Operation *Market-Garden*, but the lessons of the disaster at Arnhem had been well understood and the airborne troops would not land miles away from the ground forces and they would be dropped after the start of the crossing of the Rhine, not ahead of it. The airborne assault, codenamed *Varsity*, would also be undertaken in one single mass drop, not stretched out over multiple landings, and deliver 21,680 paratroopers and glidermen to the battlefield. It would be the largest airborne operation in history to be conducted on a single day in one location.

To prepare for the offensive, the USAAF and RAF went into action with a massive onslaught from mid-February to March 21, the scheduled start date for *Varsity*. In the last three days before the 21st Army Group's assault, the heavy bombers of the Eighth Air Force undertook 3,859 sorties, concentrating on enemy airfields and barracks, while the 2,000 medium bombers of the US 9th Bombardment Division hit communication centres, rail yards, and flak positions. One bomb demolished a building housing the headquarters of the First Parachute Army, severely wounding Schlemm who was no longer able to participate in the battle that was to come. Bomber Command carried out a similar program, and the Allied tactical aircraft – fighters and fighter-bombers – hit a variety of targets such as airfields, anti-aircraft positions, and troop concentrations. German morale, which was already crumbling among some units, was weakened further under the relentless attacks from the skies which the Luftwaffe seemed powerless to prevent.

By March 23, 1945, Montgomery's men were ready. Towards evening the Allied artillery bombardment which had accompanied the aerial assault began to increase in intensity, reaching an earth-shattering crescendo at 21.00 hours. Horrock's XXX Corps, once again at the forefront, moved to the riverbank and a few minutes later began crossing the Rhine using LVT-4 Buffalo amphibious armoured vehicles.

The 51st (Highland) Division was the first British formation to establish itself across the river, being followed later in the night by the 15th (Scottish). The US 30th Division, and then the 79th Division, landed south of Wesel. The Scottish troops encountered relatively light opposition, attributing their easy success to the artillery preparation. The fire lifted only after the first boats were three-quarters of the way across the river. German prisoners later recounted that "they had never encountered anything like it, and it completely stunned, scared, and shook them".

Elements of the ground forces pictured on the move on March 25, 1945. Here a Sherman DD tank of 44th Royal Tank Regiment, 4th Armoured Brigade, is seen passing Universal Carriers of the 6th Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers east of the Rhine. (Historic Military Press)

At 10.00 hours on March 24, the airborne troops – the British 6th Airborne Division and the US 17th Airborne Division – were lifted into the sky. Flying in tight formation, 540 American Dakota aircraft carried the twelve parachute battalions, five British, one Canadian and six from the United States, closely followed by 1,300 gliders, packed with troops, with 889 escorting fighters. This huge armada was supported by 240 Liberators of the Eighth Air Force dropping 582 tons of supplies. Some 2,153 fighters either maintained a protective umbrella over the target area or ranged far over Germany in quest of any enemy aircraft that might seek to interfere. None did.[6]

The weather for the drop was perfect and almost everyone landed on their respective Drop Zones, although some ended up in the trees and were shot down as they fought to free themselves. The 5th Parachute Brigade suffered heavily from casualties as mortar fire exploded around them during the drop. On the ground the enemy had occupied almost all of the nearby houses, but by late afternoon, the brigade's three battalions had cleared them.

Churchill tanks of 6th Guards Tank Brigade halted in Dülmen, Germany, on March 30. (Historic Military Press)

German prisoners being transported to the rear in a DUKW with Red Cross markings on March 26, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

As the Allied advance in Germany continues, a paratrooper from the US 17th Airborne Division gets a light from a Churchill tank crewman of the 6th Guards Tank Brigade near Dorsten, a town about sixteen miles south-east of Hamminkeln, on March 29, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

War correspondent Wynford Vaughan-Thomas witnessed the scene in a wooded area on the east bank of the river as the Scottish regiments joined up with the airborne troops: "The wood was full of our parachutists, digging in, and beyond the wood that fantastic coloured landscape you always get after a big airborne landing, with parachutes dangling from the trees, green parachutes, yellow parachutes, and containers scattered over the fields, gliders flung broadcast over the ploughed land. It looked as if a gigantic litter basket had been emptied over the whole countryside."[7]

By the end of the first day's action, 1,078 men of the 6th Airborne Division had been either killed or wounded, with fifty aircraft and eleven gliders shot down. Many have questioned the wisdom of the airborne effort in view of the heavy casualties and the comparative ease with which the amphibious assault achieved all its objectives.

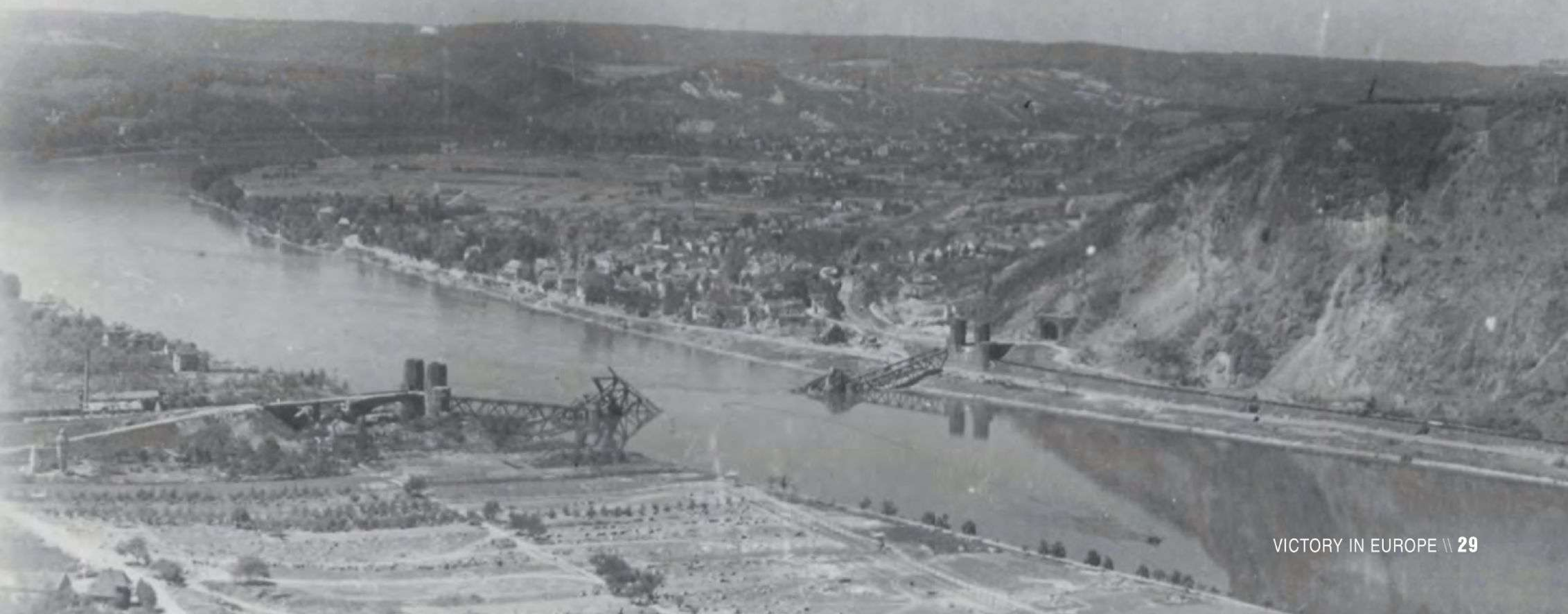
Be that as it may, as at Remagen, the Allies were across the Rhine, the last major geographical obstacle before Berlin. But the Red Army was soon to resume its offensive, and the Soviets were 300 miles closer to the capital of the Third Reich.

NOTES:

1. Otto Damm, "I was in the German Army and captured by the English!" BBC People's War, Article ID A3673208.
2. Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 22 May 1945. pp. 2607–2608.
3. Quoted from Milton Shulman, *Defeat in the West* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1947).
4. Jeffery Williams, *The Long Left Flank: The Hard Fought Way to the Reich, 1944-45* (Stoddart, Toronto, 1988), p.251.
5. 'Capturing the Bridge at Remagen, 1945,' EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com.
6. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive* (Center of Military History United States Army, Washington, D. C., 1993), p.309.
7. Quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *Invasion of the Third Reich* (Amberley, Stroud, 2011), p.188.

"The wood was full of our parachutists, digging in."

The Ludendorff Bridge finally collapsed on March 17, 1945, ten days after it was capture. The bridge and newly-established pontoon bridges enabled US forces to establish a bridgehead of some six divisions, about 25,000 troops, with accompanying tanks, artillery pieces, and trucks, across the Rhine. The bridge's capture undoubtedly hastened the fall of Hitler's Third Reich. (NARA)



1941
1945
ВЕЧНАЯ СЛАВА ГЕРОЯМ
ПАВШИМ В БОЯХ
С ФАШИСТСКИМИ
ЗАХВАТЧИКАМИ
ЗА СВОБОДУ
НЕЗАВИСИМОСТ
СОВЕТСКОГО
СОЮЗА

A statue on the Seelow Heights commemorating Russian troops involved in the bitter fighting in this area in April 1945. It can be found in the Seelow Heights Memorial Site which has transformed this former bloody battlefield into an internationally recognized place of remembrance. (Shutterstock)

THE GATES OF BERLIN

Just 50 miles from the capital of Germany are a range of low hills, the Seelow Heights. They were the final geographic barrier that stood between the Soviets and the heart of the Third Reich.

The 3rd Panzer Army had held out in Königsberg until April 9, 1945, but the 5,000 guns of the 1st Baltic Front and the 3rd Belorussian Front, along with some 2,000 Soviet aircraft, had blasted the city into rubble. Some of Königsberg's civilians had risked crossing the frozen Vistula Lagoon in the hope of escaping the vengeful Russians. The peoples of the Soviet Union had suffered unspeakable treatment at the hands of the Germans when Hitler's troops invaded their lands, and all common norms of civilised behaviour had long since been abandoned on the Eastern Front. What the Germans had started the Soviets would finish, and the long list of Soviet crimes merely matched those perpetrated upon them.

The German troops in Königsberg fought with a determination dictated by the knowledge that if they were captured by the Russians their likely fate might be worse than an honourable death defending the Fatherland. So they fought on. However, when the final assault upon the fortress-city was mounted on April 6, 1945, the garrison commander, General Otto Lasch, soon radioed Hitler's headquarters, on April 7, and asked for permission to surrender. Lasch should have known that he would be wasting his breath. He was told, of course, to "fight to the last soldier". Two days later he defied the Führer and capitulated. He was able to save the lives of some 80,000 of his men, though more than half that many had died defending a German city which, ever since that day, has been known as the Russian city of Kaliningrad, the administrative centre of a Russian enclave.

The fall of Königsberg allowed Stalin to switch his forces around, resulting in the 2nd Belorussian Front relieving Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front along the Lower Oder, and freeing Zhukov to resume his drive on Berlin. The first step towards the capital of the crumbling Reich was the seizure of the Seelow Heights which overlook the Oderbruch, the western flood plain of the Oder. Because the eastern route from Berlin passes through the heights, they were known as 'The Gates of Berlin'. Zhukov's men were going to kick those gates wide open.

'THE NIGHT HAS GONE MAD'

Facing the Soviets was General der Infanterie Theodor Busse's German 9th Army, part of Army Group Vistula which had been under the command of Himmler until relieved of his post by Hitler. As we have already seen, Himmler had been thrust into the position of an army commander, though he had no qualifications or experience for such a role. The strain this new position placed upon Himmler, and the pressure that Hitler was exerting upon him, caused Himmler to have what appears to have been a nervous breakdown and, after just three weeks in the post, he fled to a sanitorium. Generaloberst Gotthard Heinrici took over Army Group Vistula.

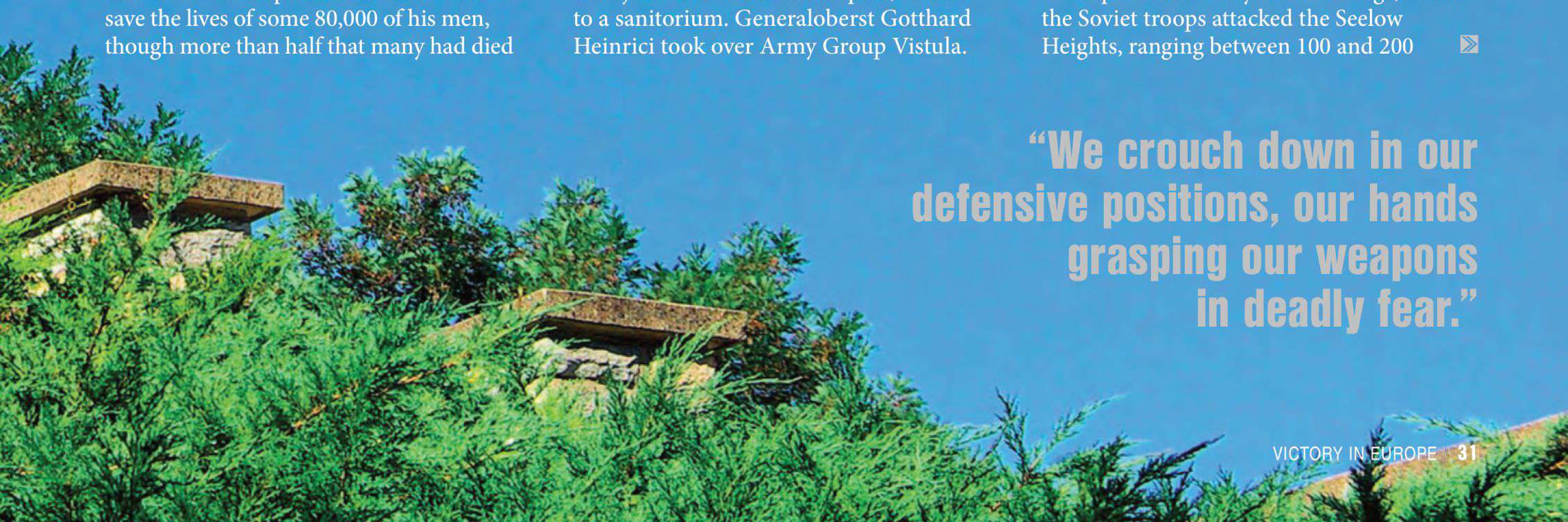
Busse's force was more than 120,000 strong, with almost 600 tanks and in excess of 2,600 artillery pieces. Formidable though this force may sound, it was dwarfed by the numbers that Zhukov commanded. In terms of infantry, Zhukov had in the region of a million men. Regarding artillery and mortars, Zhukov had almost 17,000 at his disposal, along with more than 3,000 tanks.

That colossal assembly of guns unleashed their fire on the German positions on the heights in the early hours of April 16, 1945. Friedhelm Schöneck, serving in the German 309th Infantry Division, was one of those at the receiving end of the bombardment: "The night has gone mad. An ear-deafening din fills the air. In contrast to what we have experienced previously, this is no bombardment but a hurricane tearing apart everything in front of us, over us and behind us. The sky is glowing red as if it will crack open at any moment. The ground rocks, heaves and sways… We crouch down in our defensive positions, our hands grasping our weapons in deadly fear, and our bodies shrunken into tiny heaps at the bottom of the trench.

"The bursting and howling of the shells, the whistling and hissing of shrapnel fills the air or what remains of it for us to breathe. Screams and orders are choked by steel, earth and acrid smoke of the volcano that has suddenly opened up on top of us."[1]

Despite the ferocity of the barrage, when the Soviet troops attacked the Seelow Heights, ranging between 100 and 200

"We crouch down in our defensive positions, our hands grasping our weapons in deadly fear."

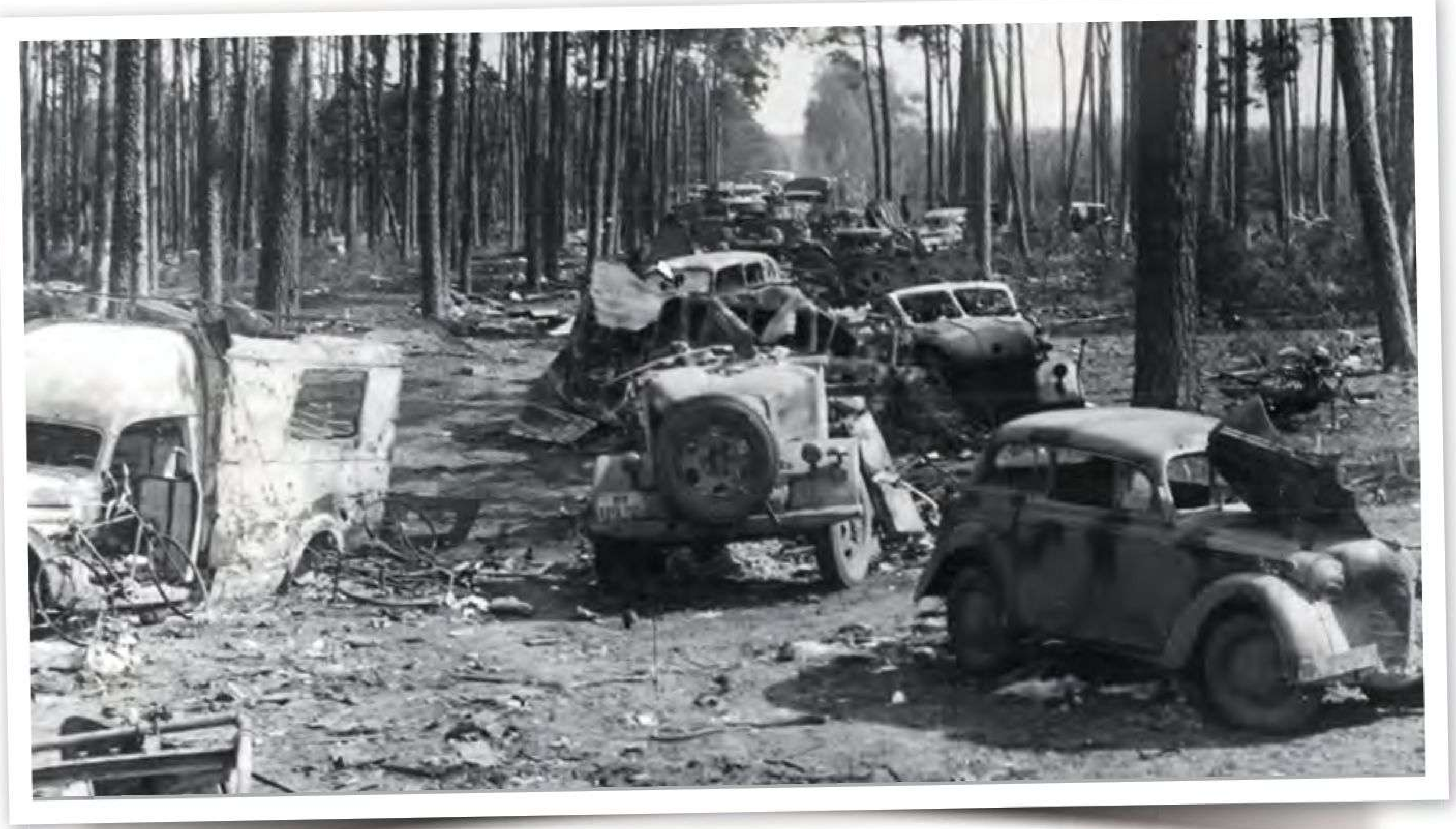


feet in height, they found the Germans defending the ground with surprising tenacity. "The Germans resisted and held out against our forces along the Seelow Heights for several days, battering our encumbered units as they attempted to trudge up the slopes made slippery by the recent spring floods," wrote one of the attackers. "Our initial massive artillery barrage had devastated the German lines but had also rendered the pulverised and muddy ground difficult for our tanks and men to advance.

"Those of the enemy who survived our barrage managed to engage our bogged down tanks and men with vicious mortar and antitank guns. Our losses were tragically high amidst those terrible days: hundreds of tanks destroyed, and thousands killed."[2]

Progress was agonisingly slow, but the result could never be in doubt, and on April 17 Marshal Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front broke through the German Army Group Centre on the Neisse which threatened the 9th Army's flank. The following day both Soviet fronts advanced steadily, though still taking heavy casualties, but it was not until the 19th that the 1st Belorussian Front broke through the last line of resistance on the heights.

About 15,000 German dead from the Battle of Halbe were buried in the Waldfriedhof Halbe, or Halbe Forest War Cemetery – part of which is seen here. Some 10,000 are unidentified burials. The Waldfriedhof Halbe is the largest war cemetery in Germany from the Second World War.



The remains of a German convoy destroyed by the Russians near Spreewald during the Battle of Halbe.

BATTLE OF HALBE

The 9th Army was in real trouble and Heinrici gave Busse permission to withdraw but, in view of what had happened to other generals when they had disobeyed Hitler's orders, he refused to contemplate retreating until ordered to do so by the Führer. The 9th Army was gradually driven back until it found itself trapped in a pocket in the Spree Forest south of the Seelow Heights, where it was surrounded by Konev's and Zhukov's armies.

With every prospect that his entire army would be wiped out, Busse planned to attempt to break out of the pocket through the village of Halbe and the pine forests south of Berlin to link up with the German Twelfth Army commanded by General Walther Wenck. The intention then was to head west and surrender to the Western Allies. This, of course, is exactly what Hitler did not want, and he ordered the two armies to join forces not to escape westwards but to attack the Soviet armies that had moved on Berlin.

Busse's first attempt to break through the Soviet lines on the evening of April 25 failed, with the Germans suffering heavy losses. A second attempt on the 26th was a similar failure.

For some, it was third time lucky when, on the night of April 28, elements of the 9th Army managed to force a passage through Halbe. It was a remarkable achievement, as the historian Antony Beevor once noted: "The most astonishing part of the story is not the numbers who died or were forced to surrender, but the 25,000 soldiers and several thousand civilians who succeeded in getting through three lines of Soviet troops."[3]

The Russians reacted swiftly, and this gap was soon sealed, as was the fate of those trapped in the pocket. Over the course of the next few days, most of the 9th Army perished.

Of the two German armies, only about 30,000 out of a total of 150,000 escaped. Along with thousands of terrified civilians, they reached the River Elbe where they gave themselves up to the American troops who had arrived on the west bank of the river on April 25, 1945.

No one knows how many dead still lie on the battlefields of the Seelow Heights and Halbe, whether German, Russian or civilian. Each year, remains of some of the fallen are discovered, all of whom are duly reinterred. This reburial took place in Waldfriedhof Halbe on October 4, 2013. (Courtesy of the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge)

NOTES:

1. Tony Le Tissier, *Marshal Zhukov at the Oder*, op cit, p.161.
2. Quoted in Sean B. Queenan, *You are There: A Soviet Soldier in the Battle of Berlin 1945*, www.academia.edu.
3. Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945* (Penguin Books, London, 2002), p.337.

With bridgeheads firmly established on the east bank of the Rhine, Eisenhower was poised to race across Germany. He controlled one of the most powerful forces ever assembled, with 90 full-strength divisions under his command, including 25 armoured and five airborne.

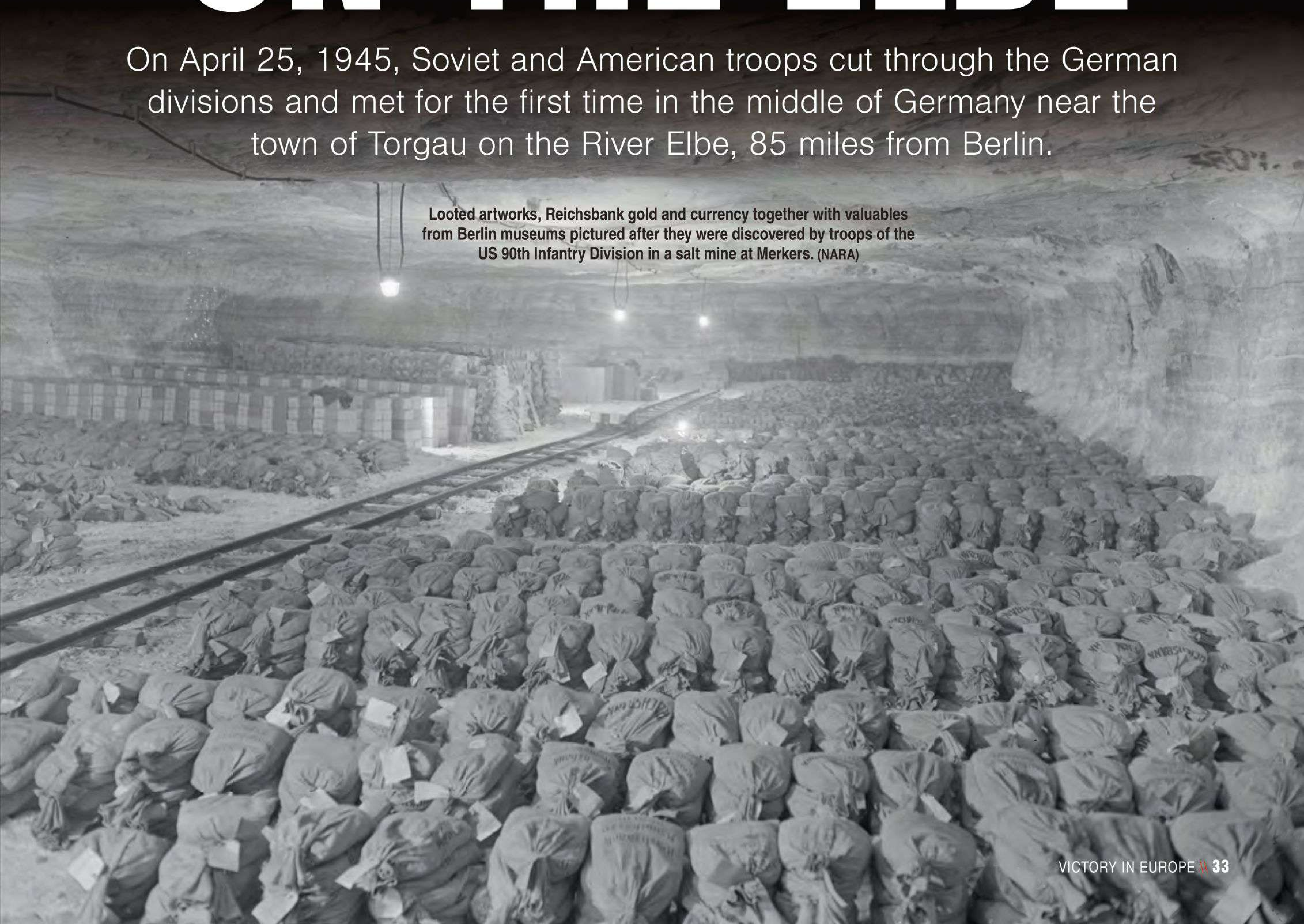
In the north, from the North Sea to a point about ten miles north of Cologne, was Montgomery's 21st Army Group, which included the British Second Army, the First Canadian Army and the US Ninth Army. Holding the middle of the Allied line from the Ninth Army's right flank to a point about 15 miles south of Mainz was Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group, consisting of the First and Third armies. Completing the Allied line to the Swiss border was the 6th Army Group commanded by Lieutenant General Jacob L. Devers, with the Seventh US Army in the north and the First French Army on the Allied right, or southern, flank.

Originally, Eisenhower had intended to use Montgomery's force to spearhead the advance through northern Germany with the two US army groups mounting subsidiary offensives to keep the Germans off balance and prevent them impeding Montgomery. But by the time the British and Americans were across the Rhine, the Soviets were already bearing down on Berlin and there was little chance of reaching the German capital before the Red Army, so he set his sights on other objectives.

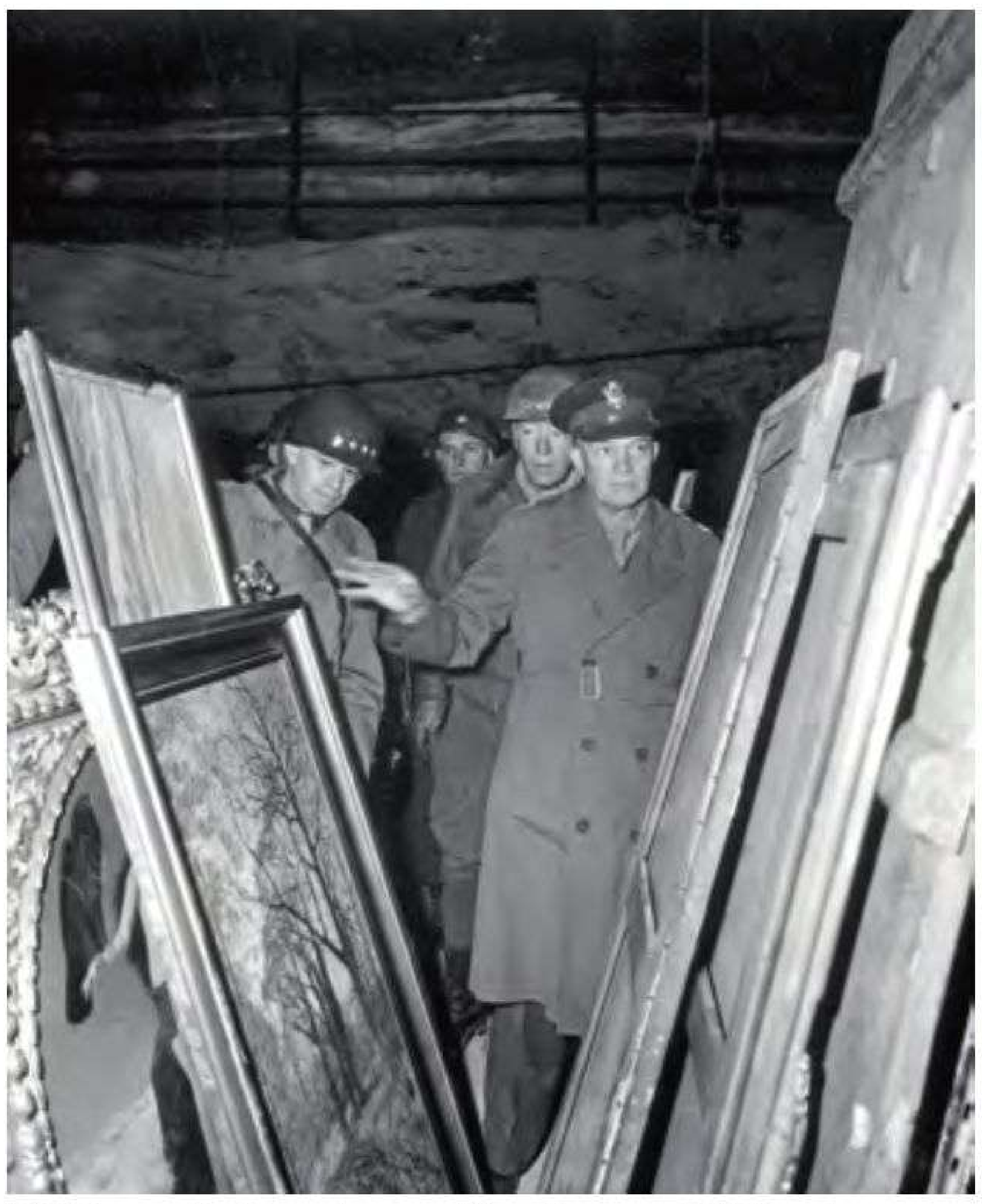
These were fourfold. The first was to form a rapid junction with the Soviets to break the German Army in two and end any possibility of it being able to reform. The second was that he had learned that a good deal of the Ruhr's armaments industry was being moved southeast deeper into Germany away from the Allies and he wanted to block this move. The third was there were rumours that fanatical Nazis were aiming to make a last-ditch stand in southern Bavaria in what was called the 'National Redoubt'. These factors influenced Eisenhower to switch his main thrust to the US Army groups in the south of the line, with the 21st Army Group playing a subordinate role. But what was probably the main reason for the switch to American units leading the advance through Germany was that US generals felt that their contribution to the war effort was far greater in terms of men and machines than that of the British. The US, therefore, should have the right to be in front and be the first Western troops into Berlin.

HANDSHAKE ON THE ELBE

On April 25, 1945, Soviet and American troops cut through the German divisions and met for the first time in the middle of Germany near the town of Torgau on the River Elbe, 85 miles from Berlin.



Looted artworks, Reichsbank gold and currency together with valuables from Berlin museums pictured after they were discovered by troops of the US 90th Infantry Division in a salt mine at Merkers. (NARA)



US Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, and Eddy, along with Colonel Bernard Bernstein, inspect some of the valuables found in the Merkers salt mine on April 12, 1945. (NARA)

'IN THE WORLD OF A NIGHTMARE'

Once all his armies were across the Rhine, the first step of Eisenhower's plan was the eradication of the Ruhr Pocket. In a pincer movement, the Ruhr was sealed off with Hitler's Army Group B being overwhelmed by the US First and Ninth armies. Thousands of prisoners were taken every day until, on April 18, 1945, Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model surrendered. In the fighting in the Ruhr, a total of 325,000 men were taken prisoner. But already Eisenhower had let Bradley's men off the leash, their sights set on driving on to Leipzig and the Elbe – with Zhukov still on the Oder there was a chance that the Americans might, after all, be able to get to Berlin before the Soviets. The race was on.

Meanwhile, on April 4, the Third Army had made an amazing discovery. Near the town of Merkers, elements of the 90th Infantry Division encountered a sealed salt mine containing a large portion of the Third Reich's national treasure. The hoard included vast quantities of German paper currency, stacks of priceless paintings, piles of looted gold, silver, jewellery and household objects, and an estimated $250,000,000 worth of gold bars and coins of various nations.

Another discovery was made on April 15, this time by the advancing British Second Army in Lower Saxony. It was the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. With the British troops was the BBC's war correspondent Richard Dimbleby, who duly sent a report back to London. The details were so extraordinary that his superiors at the BBC refused to believe what he was saying. It was only when he threatened to resign that they agreed to allow his broadcast to be made, though it is said even then it was heavily edited.

A senior US officer examines a case full of looted valuables in the Merkers salt mine on April 12, 1945. (NARA)

"I have just returned from the Belsen concentration camp," reported Dimbleby, "where for two hours I drove slowly about the place in a jeep with the chief doctor of Second Army. I had waited a day before going to the camp so I could be absolutely sure of the facts available. I find it hard to describe adequately the horrible things I have seen and heard, but here, unadorned, are the facts.

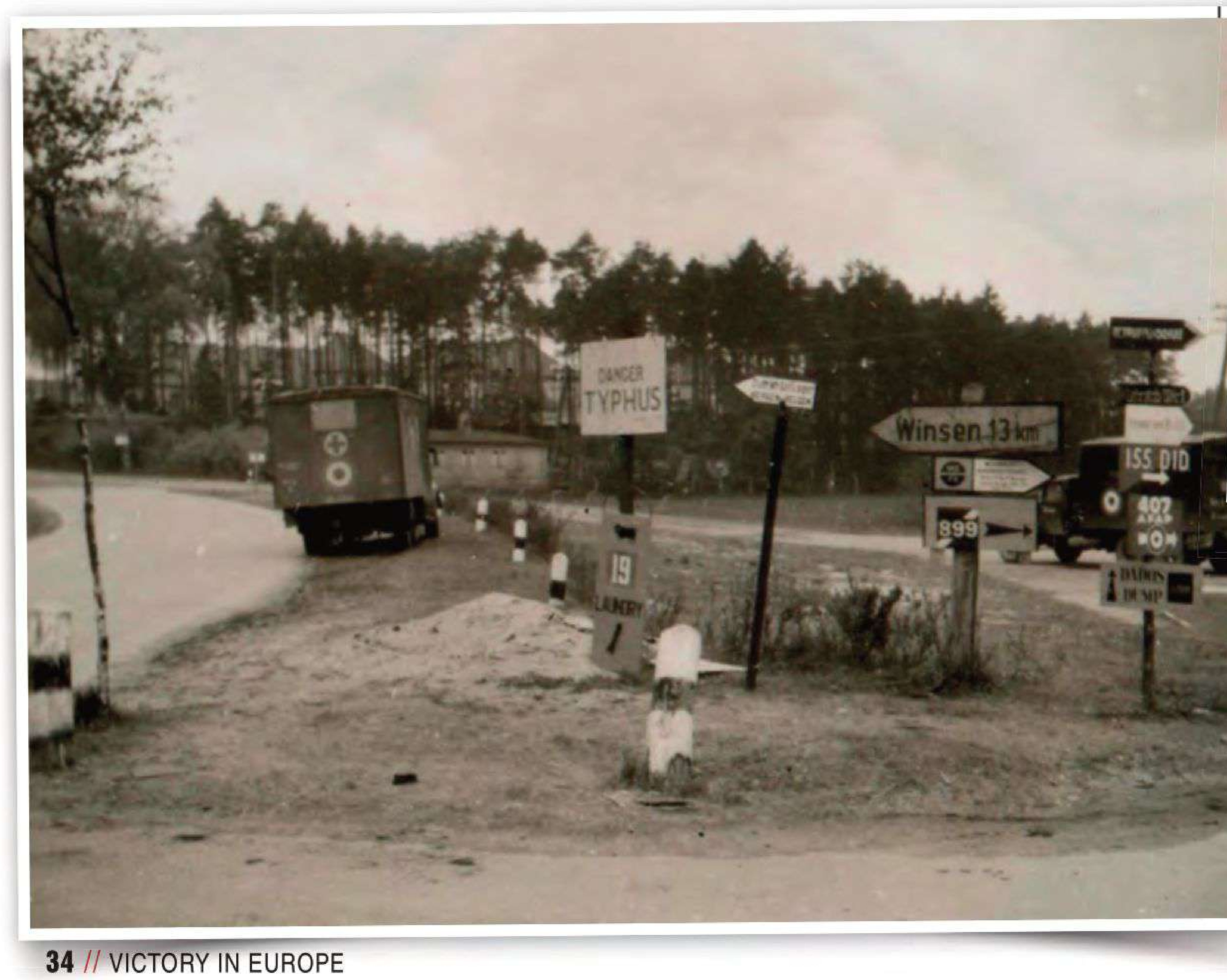
"There are forty thousand men, women and children in the camp. German and half a dozen other nationalities, thousands of them Jews. Of this total of 40,000, 4,250 are acutely ill or are dying of virulent disease. Typhus, typhoid, diphtheria, dysentery, pneumonia and childbirth fever are rife. 25,600, three quarters of them women, are either ill through lack of food or are actually dying of starvation. In the last few months alone, 30,000 prisoners have been killed off or allowed to die…

"I passed through the barrier and found myself in the world of a nightmare. Dead bodies, and some of them in decay, lay strewn about the road and along the rutted tracks. On each side of the road were brown wooden huts. There were faces at the windows, the bony, emaciated faces of starving women, too weak to come outside, propping themselves against the glass to see the daylight before they died. And they were dying, every hour and every minute."

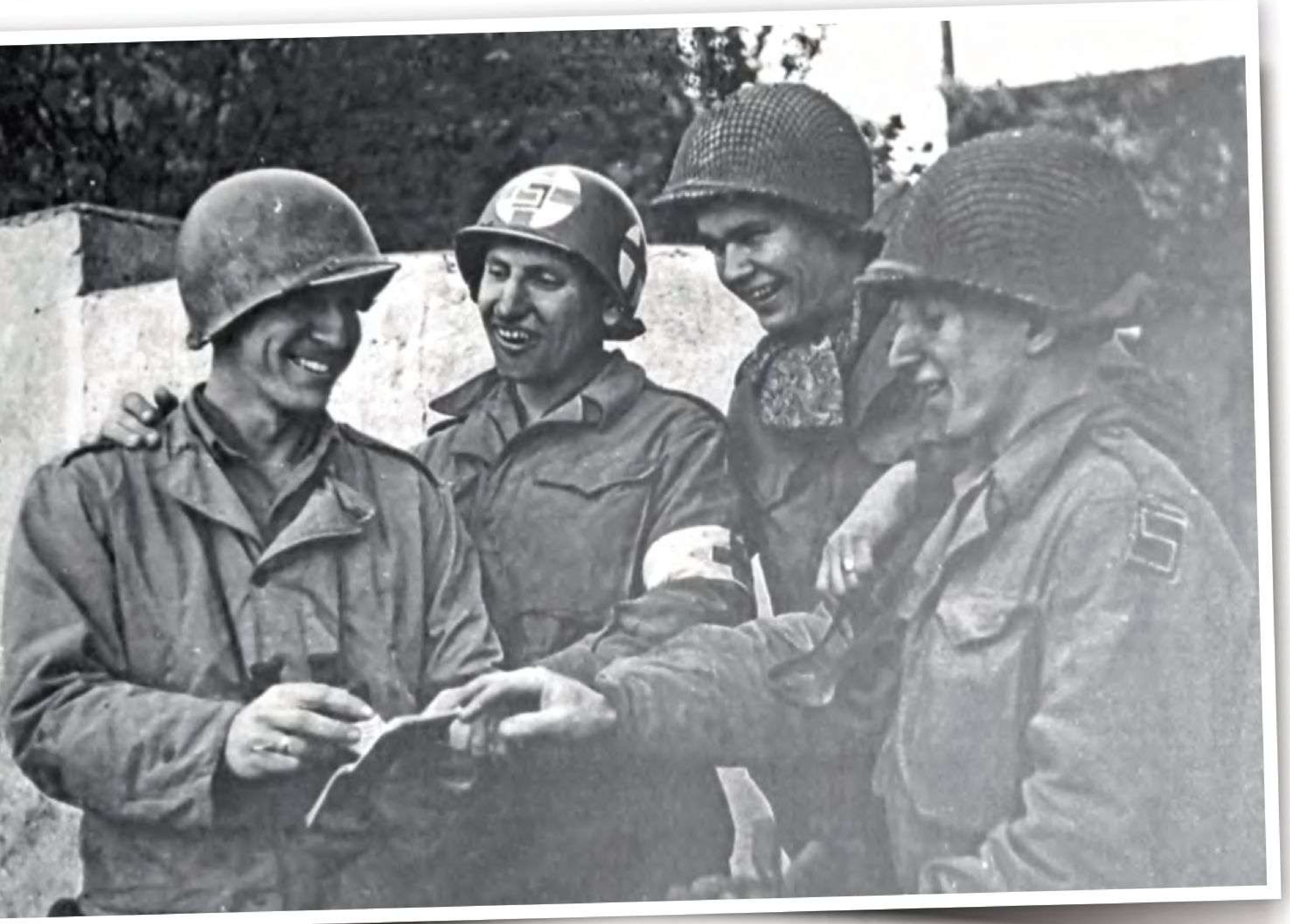
Lacking the resources and manpower, the British were unprepared to handle the 60,000 prisoners they found in the main camp and other sub-camps. The inmates were dying at a rate of around 500 a day, mostly victims of typhus, and it was months before medical teams had the situation under control, during which time almost 14,000 prisoners had succumbed.

'WE'RE ON THE ELBE'

Despite such horrors, the troops had to push on to ensure the destruction of the regime that had perpetrated these deeds. It was the 2nd US Armored Division, of Colonel Paul Disney's Ninth Army, that led the charge for the Elbe. It sped through towns where the old men of the Volkssturm were too shocked at seeing enemy tanks rushing by to take any action. It raced past German motorised columns also heading east, firing at the enemy but never pausing. Where it encountered enemy troops in dugouts barring their path, officers formed their



On April 29, 1945, Squadron Leader Edgar Venning RAFVR, a Dental Officer with the Second Tactical Air Force, passed the recently liberated concentration camp at Belsen. "The stench, even from a distance, was revolting," he recalled having taken the two images seen here. "Lots of wretched inmates… wandering around in their black and white striped camp clothes, gathering wood and trying to cook over little fires… but they all smiled and waved to us, happy to be free at last." Note the sign warning of the risk of typhus. (Historic Military Press)



On April 25, 1945, three patrols sent out by the US 69th Infantry Division encountered Russian troops at the Elbe near Torgau – the first meeting between the two Allies on the battlefield. The first of the three patrols was led by 21-year-old 1st Lieutenant Alfred 'Buck' Kotzebue, seen here on the left with three members of his patrol that day. (NARA)

An American convoy, en route to meet up with the Russians near Torgau, stops for a break, at which point it has become the object of great interest of a large group of slave labourers who are on the move after being freed by the Russians. (NARA)

An aerial view of the scene of an American-Russian linkup near Torgau, April 1945. (NARA)

tanks up in line and charged, crashing like a squadron of cavalry against a thin line of infantry. At 20.00 hours on April 11, a brief message was flashed from Disney to Supreme Allied Headquarters: "We're on the Elbe."[1]

The Americans had reached the Elbe to the south-east of Magdeburg, where they were just 50 miles short of the German capital. The next day other elements of the Ninth Army reached the Elbe and by April 13 they had crossed the river with nothing to stop them moving on Berlin. But two days later, on April 15, Eisenhower sent Bradley a message instructing him to stay where he was – there would be no attempt to reach the German capital.

Other American units, facing somewhat stiffer resistance, also reached the Elbe, and in the case of Patton's Third Army to halt on the line of the River Mulde. The US commanders then turned their attention to mopping up pockets of resistance in their rear areas.

As the 6th Army Group and the Third Army finished clearing southern Germany and approached Austria, it was clear to most observers, Allied and German alike, that the war was all but over. Many towns flew white flags of surrender to spare themselves the otherwise inevitable destruction suffered by those that had resisted, while German troops surrendered by the tens of thousands, sometimes as entire units.

'TREAT THEM NICELY'

With German resistance across much of the country at an end, a moment of great historical significance, when American and Soviet troops would meet for the first time, was imminent. Such was the level of expectation that excitement among many First Army and Ninth Army units was mounting all along the line.

The stretch of the River Elbe near Strehla, to the south of Torgau, which 1st Lieutenant Alfred Kotzebue crossed on April 25, 1945.

"Rumor piled upon rumor," noted Charles B. MacDonald, and "one false report followed another. Russian radio traffic cutting in on American channels convinced almost everybody that contact was near. Word was on the 23rd that a staff sergeant in the 6th Armored Division actually had talked by radio with the Russians. Unit after unit reported flares to the east, attaching to them varying interpretations. A battalion of the 69th Division on 23 April reported sighting a Russian tank with a white stripe around the turret, then had to admit that it was actually a grassy hummock with a clothesline stretched across it."[2]

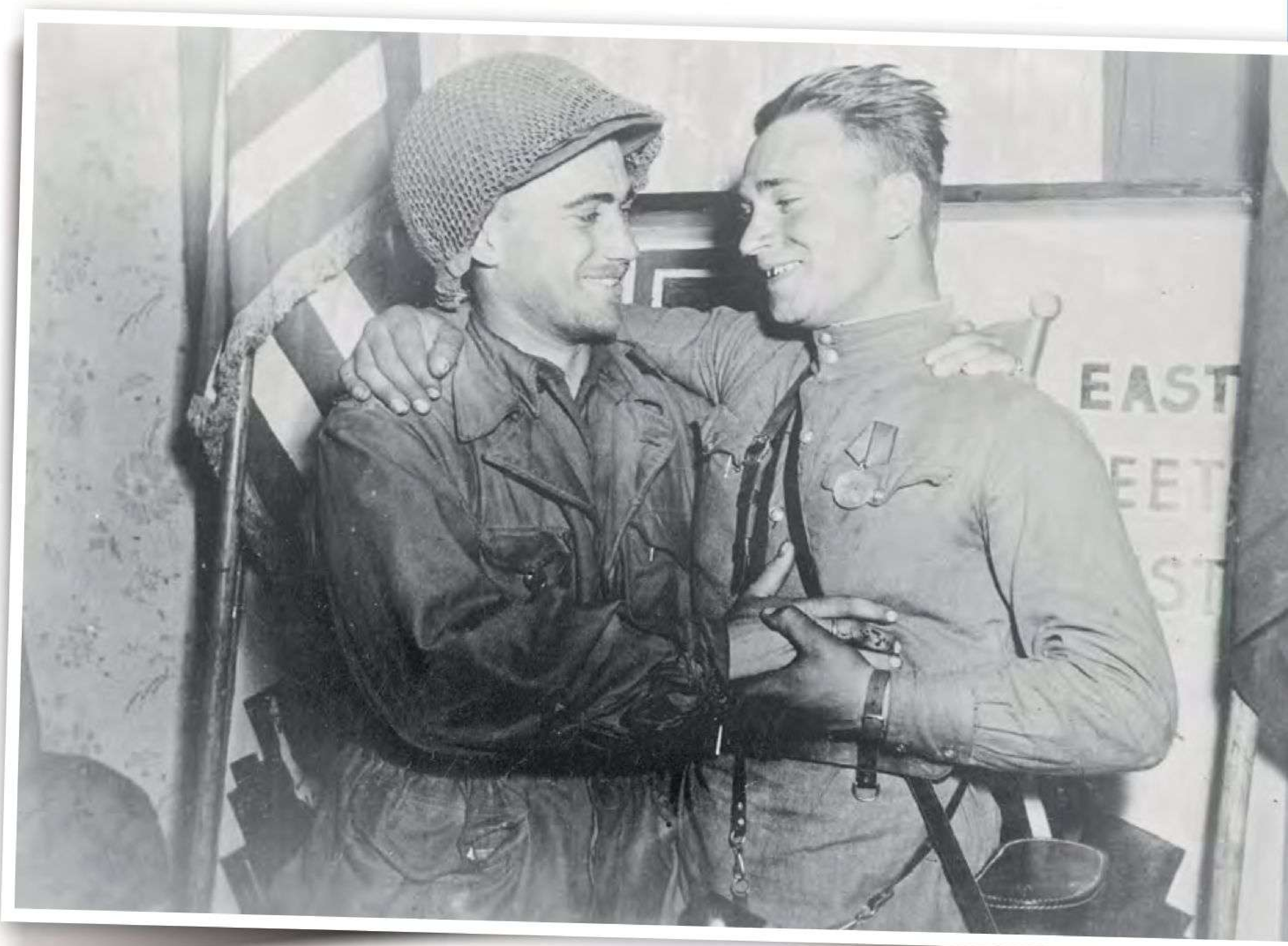
That Soviet and American troops would soon meet was beyond doubt. Indeed, the method of communication for such an eventually, to indicate to the troops on either side that the others were friendly, had been worked out between the Allied leaders at Yalta. This made it clear that the first American soldiers to make contact were to fire a green-coloured star shell – the Soviets, of course, a red one.

Preparing for such a moment, General Courtney Hodges had, referring to the Russian troops, already instructed his men to, 'Treat them nicely'. At the same time, at his headquarters a specially equipped jeep was prepared for presentation to the army commander of the first Soviet soldiers encountered.

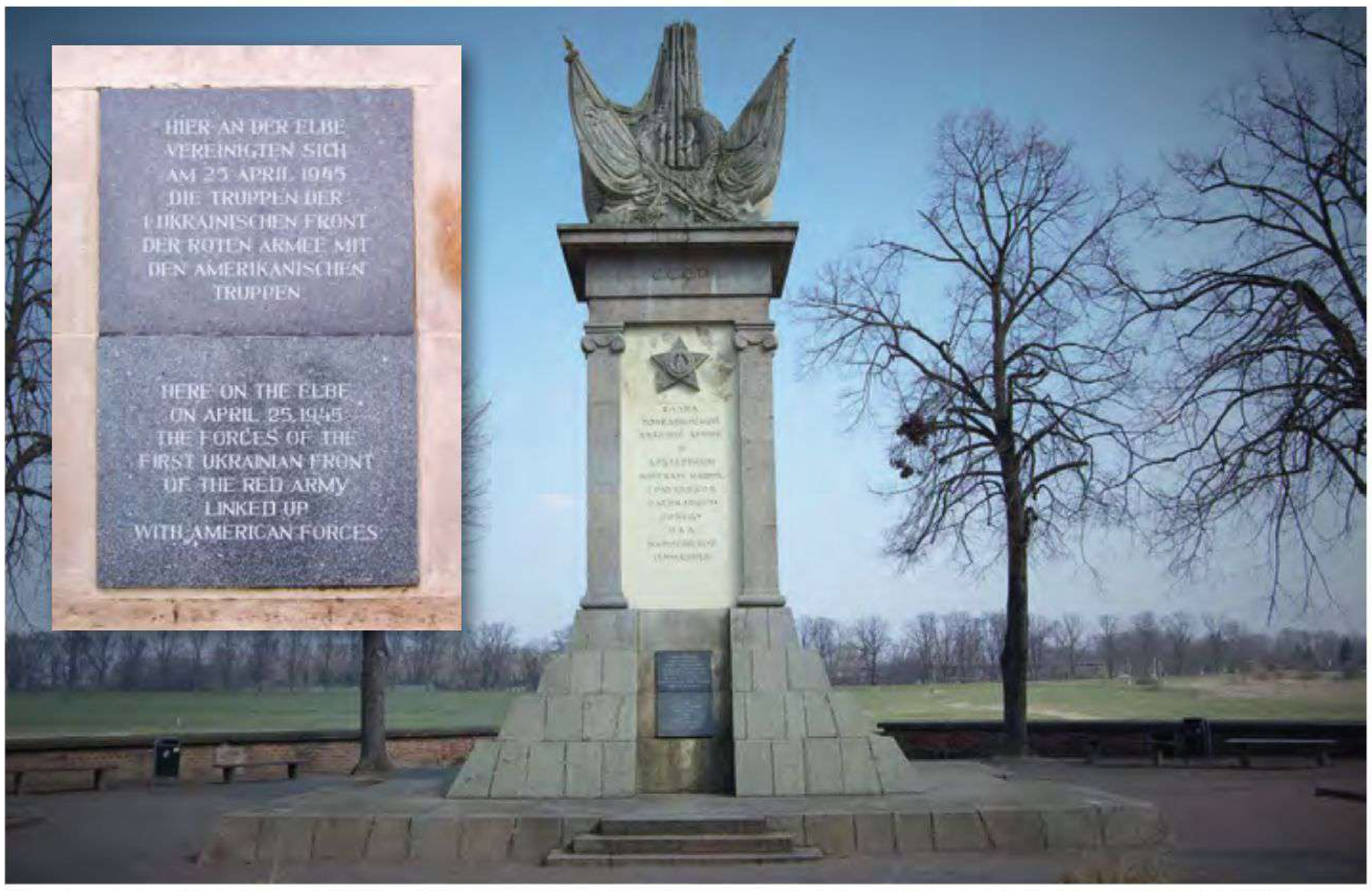
As the hours ticked by, and no doubt driven by a desire to be the first to meet the Russians, one or two frustrated American commanders decided to try and force matters along. During the afternoon of April 24, for example, Colonel Charles M. Adams, the commanding officer of the 273rd Infantry Regiment, called in 21-year-old

During the link-up near Torgau, a Soviet soldier waits on the west side of the Elbe river for a ferry to take him back to his comrades on the east. (Department of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada; PA-171744)

A Canadian soldier during the link-up. Gunner Brian O'Regan is pictured with two Russian soldiers at Torgau, April 27, 1945. (Department of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada; PA-136330)



Though the Allies first met on April 25, the official linkup ceremonies in the same area took place two days later. Here Second Lieutenant William Robertson and Lieutenant Alexander Sylvashko are pictured in front of an 'East Meets West' sign near Torgau. Though it is often stated that this picture was taken on April 25, 1945, it is believed to in fact depict events two days later. (NARA)



The imposing memorial in Torgau that commemorates the link-up between East and West on April 25, 1945. The river itself is just behind the wall. The Russians would have approached towards the camera from the far bank. The flags in the distance on the right denote another set of memorials to the meeting. (Courtesy of Clemens Franz)

1st Lieutenant Albert 'Buck' Kotzebue of Company G. Kotzebue was, ordered Adams, to take a jeep-mounted patrol of 35 men and head out east with the sole aim of contacting the Russians. Lieutenant Kotzebue was to go only as far as Kuehren, a village four miles beyond the River Mulde.

Probing out into the German countryside, Kotzebue's patrol soon reached Kuehren having encountered "a few hospitalized Allied prisoners and hundreds of docile Germans anxious to surrender". With no sign of the Red Army, or any enemy hostility, Kotzebue sought permission to push on beyond the previously agreed five-mile limit. With this granted, the patrol continued on, actually penetrating two miles further still. When darkness fell, and still having encountered nothing but the by now obligatory German groups trying to escape the Red Army, Kotzebue returned to Kuehren for the night.

The next morning, having been fed by the local population, Lieutenant Kotzebue and his men resumed their quest – though up and down the entire front other units and patrols were attempting to achieve the same thing. Once again, Charles MacDonald takes up the story: "Lieutenant Kotzebue and his men advanced almost due east through the town of Dahlen toward the Elbe in the vicinity of Strehla, a few miles northwest of Riesa, some seventeen miles southeast of Torgau. It was almost noon as the jeeps slowed to enter the farming village of Leckwitz, less than two miles from the Elbe.

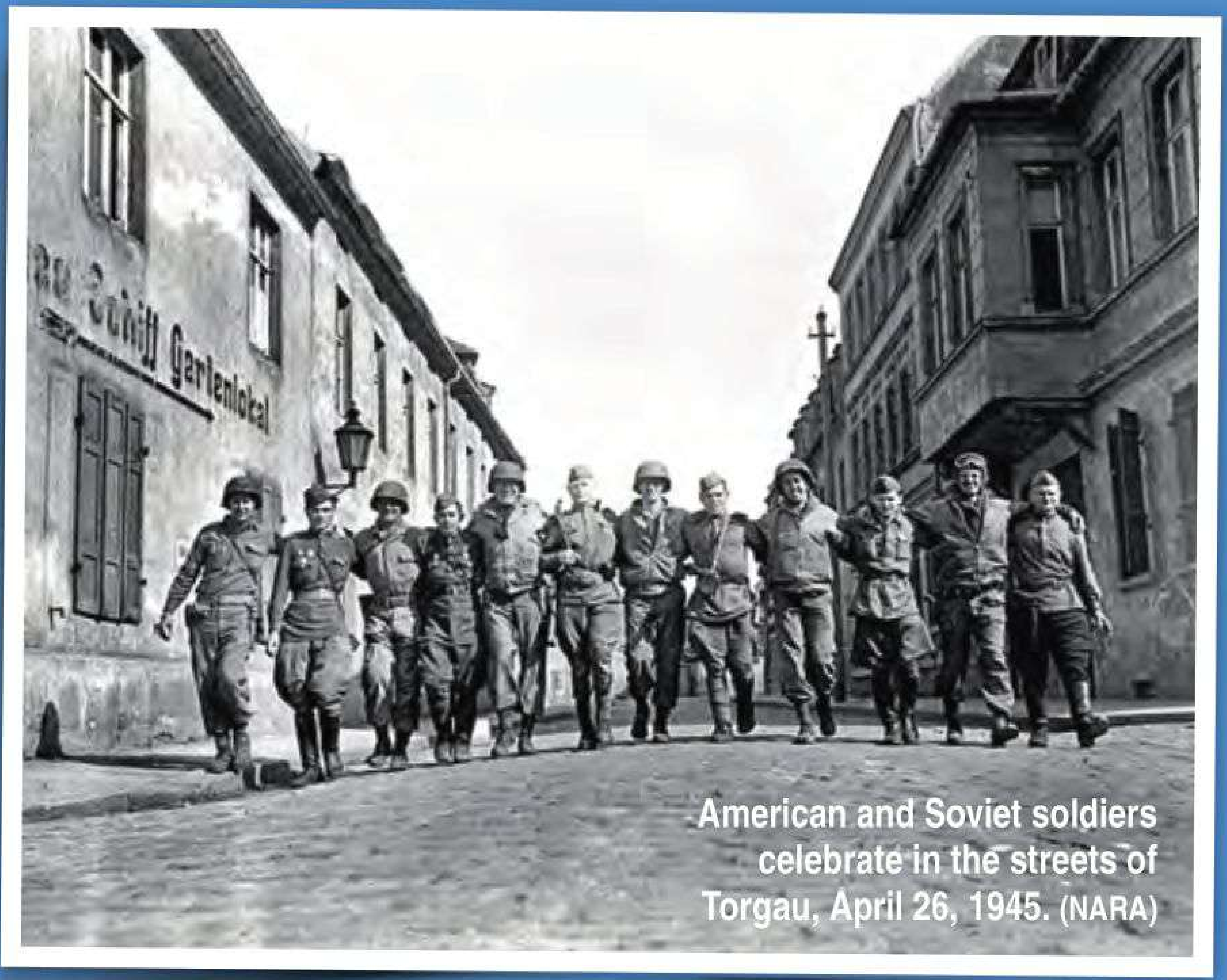
"Far down the main street, the men spotted a horseman just as he turned his mount into a courtyard and passed from view. At a glance, the man's costume seemed unusual. Could it be? Was this it? Spinning forward, the jeeps came to a halt at the entrance to the courtyard. Inside, among a crowd of foreign laborers, was the horseman. There could be no doubt. He was a Russian soldier."

It was 11.30 hours on April 25, 1945. Soldiers from the west had finally met soldiers from the east. The war in Europe was undoubtedly entering its final, decisive, moments.

Through a Russian-speaking member of his unit, Lieutenant Kotzebue "asked directions to the soldier's commander", continued MacDonald, "but the Russian was suspicious and reserved. Waving his arm to the east, he suggested that one of the foreign

EAST
MEETS
WEST

An American and a Soviet soldier are pictured greeting each other in front of an 'East Meets West' sign near Torgau. Though it is often stated that this picture was taken on April 25, 1945, it is again believed to have been taken two days later. (NARA)



American and Soviet soldiers celebrate in the streets of Torgau, April 26, 1945. (NARA)

laborers, a Pole, could lead them better than he. With that, he galloped away.

"Taking the Pole as a guide, the patrol continued to the Elbe, a few hundred yards north of Strehla. Seeing uniformed figures on the east bank milling about the wreckage of a column of vehicles close to the remains of a tactical bridge, Lieutenant Kotzebue raised his binoculars. Again, there could be no doubt. They were Russians."

Kotzebue had the identification flares fired off, but these brought little response from the opposite bank. Undeterred, Kotzebue crossed the Elbe in a boat along with three intelligence and reconnaissance officers. Once across, they were eventually introduced to Lieutenant Colonel Alexander T. Gardiev, commander of the 175th Rifle Regiment. Aware of the significance of his encounter with the Soviets, Kotzebue later recalled it being "a sure signal this was the end of the war".

'V FOR VICTORY'

Also on the morning of April 25, 1945, Lieutenant Bill Robertson, of the 273th Regiment of the 69th Infantry Division, was driving towards the town of Torgau. Though he knew that he might encounter Soviet troops there, he did not have any green flares but had come up with his own plan as to how he would show the Soviets that he and the three men in his patrol were Allies – they would be displaying the American flag. There was, though, a slight snag in that Robertson did not have a flag to wave. All that his men were able to do was find a white sheet and paint the stars and stripes on it as best they could.

Looking west across the River Elbe towards Castle Hartenfels in Torgau. The memorials and US, Russian and German flags in the foreground commemorate the Allied meetings in the area in April 1945. The old bridge used by Lieutenant Bill Robertson and Lieutenant Alexander Sylvashko, part of which can be seen on the far bank, would have been in the left of this view. (Karin Jaehne/Shutterstock)

On the other side of the Elbe, the Red Army's Lieutenant Alexander Sylvashko was also aware that he might meet American soldiers. He saw the makeshift flag and followed the pre-determined protocol and fired a red flare. Robertson, though, could not reciprocate with a green one. Understandably, Sylvashko suspected a German trick, and opened fire.

Robertson then recalled liberating a Russian soldier from a German prisoner of war camp outside of Torgau. He had the soldier brought forward and told him to tell the Russians that his men were friendly. With the message duly passed, the firing ceased at 16.00 hours.

Robertson and his men picked their way carefully across the centre of Torgau's bridge to where Sylvashko sent one of his men, Sergeant Nickolay Andreyev. "Put it there," Robertson reportedly said when he held his hand out to make that historic handshake with the Soviet NCO. Not really sure what they should do, they embraced awkwardly and then both made the famous Churchillian 'V for Victory' sign.

CALLING THE HALT

Many have queried why Eisenhower called off the race for Berlin and told his generals to pause on the Elbe. It is generally believed that this was a political decision, but this is not entirely true. At the time of the Yalta Conference, it was reasonable to assume that Berlin, Prague, and even cities west of the Elbe might fall to the Red Army. Yet, as we have already seen, there was no fixed demarcation line between east and west decided upon at Yalta. This Churchill confirmed after the war: "The Soviet armies were at this very moment [Yalta] swarming over the pre-war frontiers, and we wished them all success… It was well understood by everyone that the agreed occupational zones must not hamper the operational movements of the armies. Berlin, Prague, and Vienna could be taken by whoever got there first."[3]

There was, therefore, no political imperative that the Soviets should not be permitted to occupy Berlin. Eisenhower was rightly only interested in pursuing military goals. He made his position quite clear on April 8: "As regards Berlin I am quite ready to admit that it has political and psychological significance, but of far greater importance will be the location of the remaining German forces in relation to Berlin. It is on them that I am going to concentrate my attention."[4] Of concern to Eisenhower at this point were reports that the Nazis were going to make one grand last stand at an Alpine Fortress in Bavaria.

The attention of the Soviets, though, was firmly fixed on Berlin. The last effort of the war in Europe was about to begin.

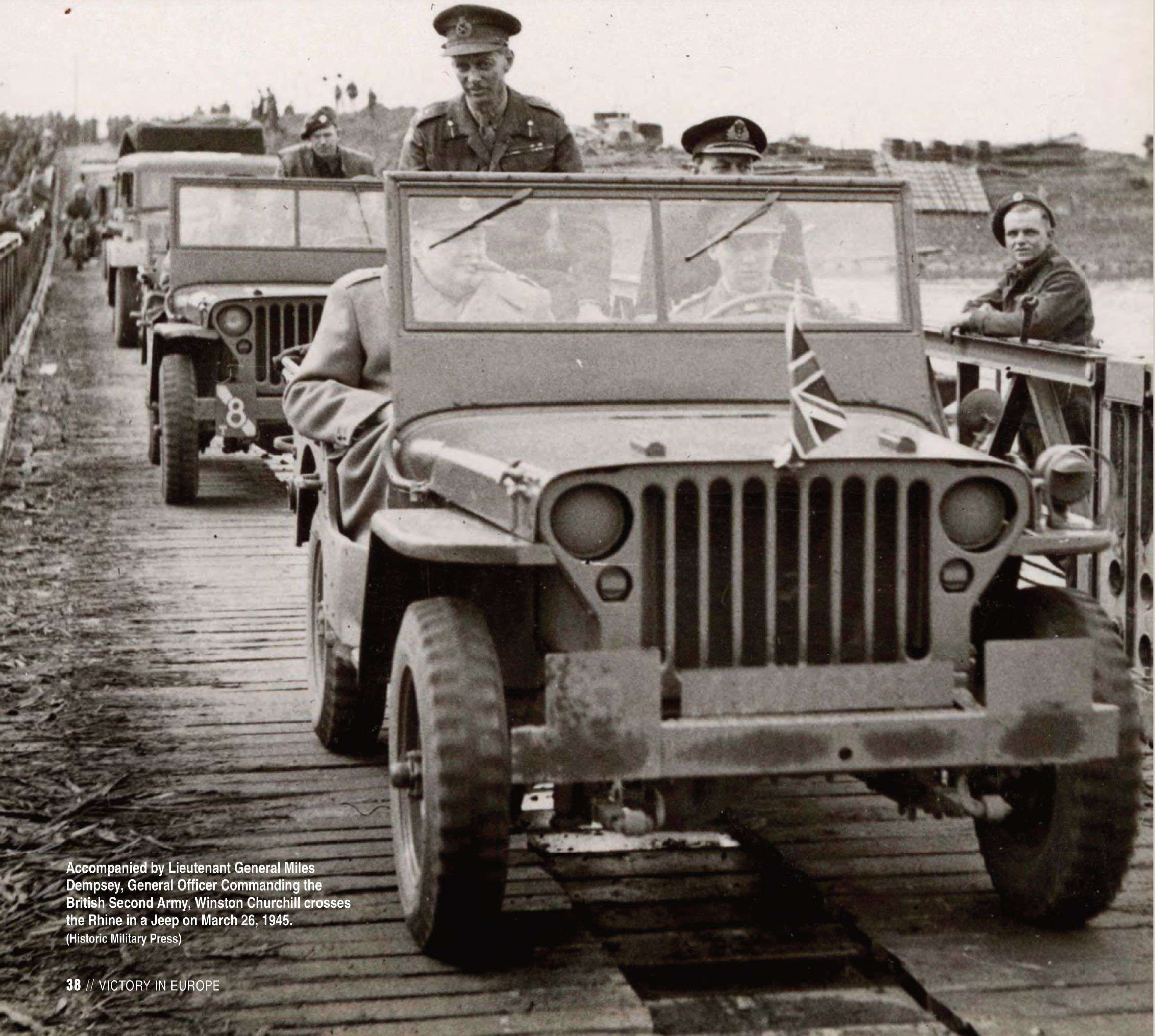
NOTES:

1. Cornelius Ryan, *The Last Battle* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2015), p.230.
2. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive* (Center of Military History United States Army, Washington, D. C., 1993), pp.450-5.
3. Churchill, op cit, p.510.
4. Forrest C. Pogue, 'The Decision to Halt at the Elbe', *The Supreme Command* (Washington, 1954), p.491.

A view looking north up the River Elbe at Torgau. The Americans advanced to the famous meeting from the left, the Russians from the right, or east. The marker in the river indicates part of the old bridge, this being the structure used by Lieutenant Bill Robertson and Lieutenant Alexander Sylvashko on the morning of April 25, 1945. Part of the structure can be seen on the left in front of the imposing Castle Hartenfels. A plaque to the meeting can be seen on the metal railings there. (Shutterstock)

THE DRIVE ON HAMBURG

Whilst the Americans headed to the south, British forces battled their way across northern Europe into Hamburg – Germany's biggest port and its second city.



Accompanied by Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey, General Officer Commanding the British Second Army, Winston Churchill crosses the Rhine in a Jeep on March 26, 1945.
(Historic Military Press)

Cromwell tanks of 8th Hussars, the armoured reconnaissance regiment of the 7th Armoured Division, massing in preparation for the next stage of the advance into Germany, March 29, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

While the Allied armies in the south marched to the Alps, Montgomery's 21 Army Group drove north and northeast. The British Second Army's right wing reached the Elbe southeast of Hamburg on April 19, 1945. Its left fought for a week to capture Bremen, which fell on April 26. On April 29 the British made an assault crossing of the Elbe, supported on the following day by the recently reattached 18th Airborne Corps. Ahead lay the challenge of taking Germany's biggest port and its second city – Hamburg.

On Montgomery's left, meanwhile, one corps of the First Canadian Army reached the North Sea near the Dutch-German border on April 16, while another drove through the central Netherlands, trapping the German forces remaining in that country.

Churchill tanks of 6th Guards Tank Brigade in Dulmen, Germany, March 30, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

A Humber scout car of 11th Armoured Division pictured during the advance to Osnabruck, April 2-3, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

THE PUSH FOR HAMBURG

Squadron Leader Edgar Venning RAFVR, a Dental Officer with the Second Tactical Air Force, had maintained a diary since the day his Mobile Dental Surgery had gone ashore in Normandy after D-Day. The entries provide an intriguing record of his progress across northern Europe, an advance that was, at times, so rapid that Edgar noted "one can hardly keep pace with the events happening so fast all over Europe". The date of this entry in his diary is May 3, 1945, the very day that both Lübeck and Hamburg were finally taken.

At times the drive on Hamburg had been fiercely contested by the Germans. On April 20, for example, the 8th Hussars and a company from the Rifle Brigade captured the town of Daerstorf, eight miles west of Harburg, but only after bitter house-to-house fighting and the deployment of Wasps, a version of the ubiquitous Universal Carrier fitted with a flamethrower, against enemy infantry and anti-tank gun positions.

The following day the Durham Light Infantry assaulted, and took, the village of Maschen, which lay 16 miles due south of Hamburg. In the surrounding woods were deployed a Hungarian SS unit, a German tank destroyer battalion and numerous Panzerfaust teams. It took the men of the 53rd Division, supported by the 1st Royal Tank Regiment, four days to dislodge them. Over 2,000 prisoners were taken in the process.

Then, under cover of darkness, at 02.30 hours on April 26, the Germans launched a counterattack near the village of Vahrendorf, some 14 miles south of Hamburg's city centre. Symptomatic of the state of Hitler's forces at this stage of the war, the attackers comprised a rag-tag assortment of members of the 12th SS Reinforcement Regiment, a smattering of ordinary soldiers, Hitler Jugend, impressed ships' crews, stevedores, U-boat crewmen, Volkssturm and policemen and firemen from Hamburg. They were supported by a number of 88mm guns that were no longer deployed in the anti-aircraft role in the city.

The fighting in Vahrendorf raged throughout the day. At one point a pair of self-propelled 75mm guns worked their way into the village, seriously threatening the British line until a squadron of tanks arrived and resolved the situation. The enemy finally withdrew on April 27, leaving behind 60 dead and 70 prisoners.

SURRENDER

Bit by bit, though, the net continued to close around Hamburg. On April 28, British artillery shelled a number of targets in the city itself. The following day, on the instruction of the combat commander of Hamburg, Generalmajor Alwin Wolz, who had been appointed to the role on April 15, 1945, a deputation from the city was sent out to discuss surrender terms.

"The negotiations went on for some time," notes one account, "but on 1st May General Woltz's [*sic*] staff car under a white flag approached the 'D' Company 9th DLI. Two staff officers were then taken to Battalion HQ. Admiral Doenitz had ordered General Keitel to order General Woltz to surrender the city of Hamburg to the Desert Rats… On 2nd May General Woltz arrived at

A Universal Carrier of the 12th King's Royal Rifle Corps, 8th Armoured Brigade, fitted with a .30-calibre Browning, in action against a German position in the Netherlands, April 2, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

ENTERING GERMANY
Be on your Guard
DON'T FRATERNIZE WITH GERMANS

Squadron Leader Edgar Venning RAFVR pictured on the German border, which he crossed for the first time on April 8, 1945, whilst part of the British drive towards Hamburg. (Historic Military Press)

A convoy of lorries, led by a CMP Chevrolet, battles its way along a muddy lane during the advance in Germany, April 4, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

A bedraggled white flag-bearing group of German soldiers that Squadron Leader Venning encountered while driving north from Winson towards Hamburg. (Historic Military Press)

Squadron Leader Venning's Jeep slotted in among tanks of the British Second Army (almost certainly the 7th Armoured Division, or Desert Rats) waiting for the go-ahead to make the last part of the drive into Hamburg, May 3, 1945. It is believed that this photograph was taken in the vicinity of the suburb of Harburg. (Historic Military Press)

Divisional HQ to discuss the arrangements for the surrender, which was [to be] taken by Brigadier Spurling on the afternoon of 3rd May 1945."[1]

As he later noted, Squadron Leader Venning suddenly found himself at the centre of events on May 3, experiencing the "excitement of being in one of the first few vehicles to enter". The description of that final push into central Hamburg is best left to Edgar:

"The Doc. and I had no queue of patients, so we accepted the invitation of… the Official Observer RAF, attached to 83 Group, to accompany him by Jeep into Hamburg, which at noon that day was to be taken over… by our own Second Army.

"For an hour or so we sped along the bumpy cobbled roads on an army route to Winson [due south of Hamburg] and there turned on to the Hamburg road. Some way along the road we remarked that we were no longer on an army marked route and, moreover, there were no army vehicles or personnel to be seen. We were just wondering what were the chances of meeting a pocket of resistance, and whether we should turn back, when we encountered a little group of men trudging along – a dozen or so German soldiers carrying a white flag in front of them.

C.A.W. Schnell
WOL T249890

Universal Carriers towing 6-pounder anti-tank guns and other vehicles of 15th (Scottish) Division in Celle during the advance to the River Elbe, April 13, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

"We stopped – and they stopped. Most of them were very young and some looked only 16 or so. So, we told them to carry on marching, and pressed on towards Hamburg. But the bridge on the main Hamburg road had been blown up, so we had to go back and find a different route.

"Soon, to our relief, we came across a village where a lot of army vehicles were parked by the roadside. And here we learnt that there had been a hitch – the army had not yet gone in… long lines of tanks were waiting round the corner for the word 'go'.

"In our RAF Jeep, clearly marked 'Official Observer', we cruised along past the long lines of tanks, Bren gun carriers and so on and, just as we reached the head of the column, they started to move off. We watched as these huge armoured vehicles went forward in battle array – a most impressive sight. They weren't taking any chances – it was to be a military operation, not a triumphal parade.

"Our Official Observer wasn't going to miss this, and much to amusement of the blokes in the tanks, drove on towards Hamburg. It was an amazing drive. There was, of course, no resistance at all. In fact, in the outskirts the Germans were lining the streets, wide-eyed with relief and undoubtedly pleased that for them it was all over. Many were waving, if a little self-consciously."

A DESOLATE, DEVASTATED AND DESERTED CITY

At this point, the convoy came to the bridges over the River Elbe, at which the tanks dispersed themselves at strategic points on either side of the road. As the crews awaited further instructions, the final advance on the city centre came to a temporary halt.

"We got into conversation with a Major of the Desert Rats [the 7th Armoured Division] whose Jeep was heading the convoy at the bridge," continued Venning. "He took a pretty good view of the job the RAF had done – and advised us to tag on behind him. Eventually the message came through to proceed, the battalion commander came up in his armoured car, and we all moved forward into the heart of the city.

"It was like a city of the dead. By a British order, a forty-eight-hour curfew kept everyone indoors and behind closed windows and shutters… We drove through a desolate, devastated and deserted city, with piles of rubble and twisted steel on either side of the road."

Large sections of the city had been devastated by Allied bombing, though around the central square and the Rathaus, or Town Hall, the damage was visibly less. For Edgar and his colleagues, the empty roads meant that they could sweep on towards the city centre. "Since leaving the bridge," he recalled, "the road had been lined on both sides by German military police, every 100 yards, in long green greatcoats and impressive helmets. Many saluted as the convoy went by – no Nazi Heil, but a deferential cap salute…

"We drove to the Town Hall square and there were a bunch of Nazi officials on the steps of the Rathaus awaiting the Brigadier. All the tanks and Jeeps and armour piled into this vast city square behind us, and soon the [German] officer with the white flag arrived, followed by the Brigadier. They entered the building amid much saluting and heel-clicking and photography."

AN OPEN CITY

One reporter had managed to send through the following report that was published in an evening edition on May 3: "Hamburg, Germany's greatest port and chief pocket of resistance along the North Sea coast, fell to the British today without a shot being fired. At nine o'clock this morning, a few hours after Gen. Dempsey's columns completely isolated the garrison by their dash to the Baltic near Luebeck [*sic*], Hamburg Radio announced that the port had been declared an open city and that the British would begin its occupation at noon…

"Hamburg, second city of the pre-war Reich, contained 1,430,000 people and possessed 110 miles of docks and landing stages. Its capture is easily the biggest prize to fall to British troops since D-Day. Reuter's radio station says it is evident that Hamburg radio station, formerly the Germans' chief transmitter in the North, is now operating under Allied control.

"Hamburg's fall, only one day after the capitulation in Italy… deprives the dying

»

Reichsautobahn
Hamburg

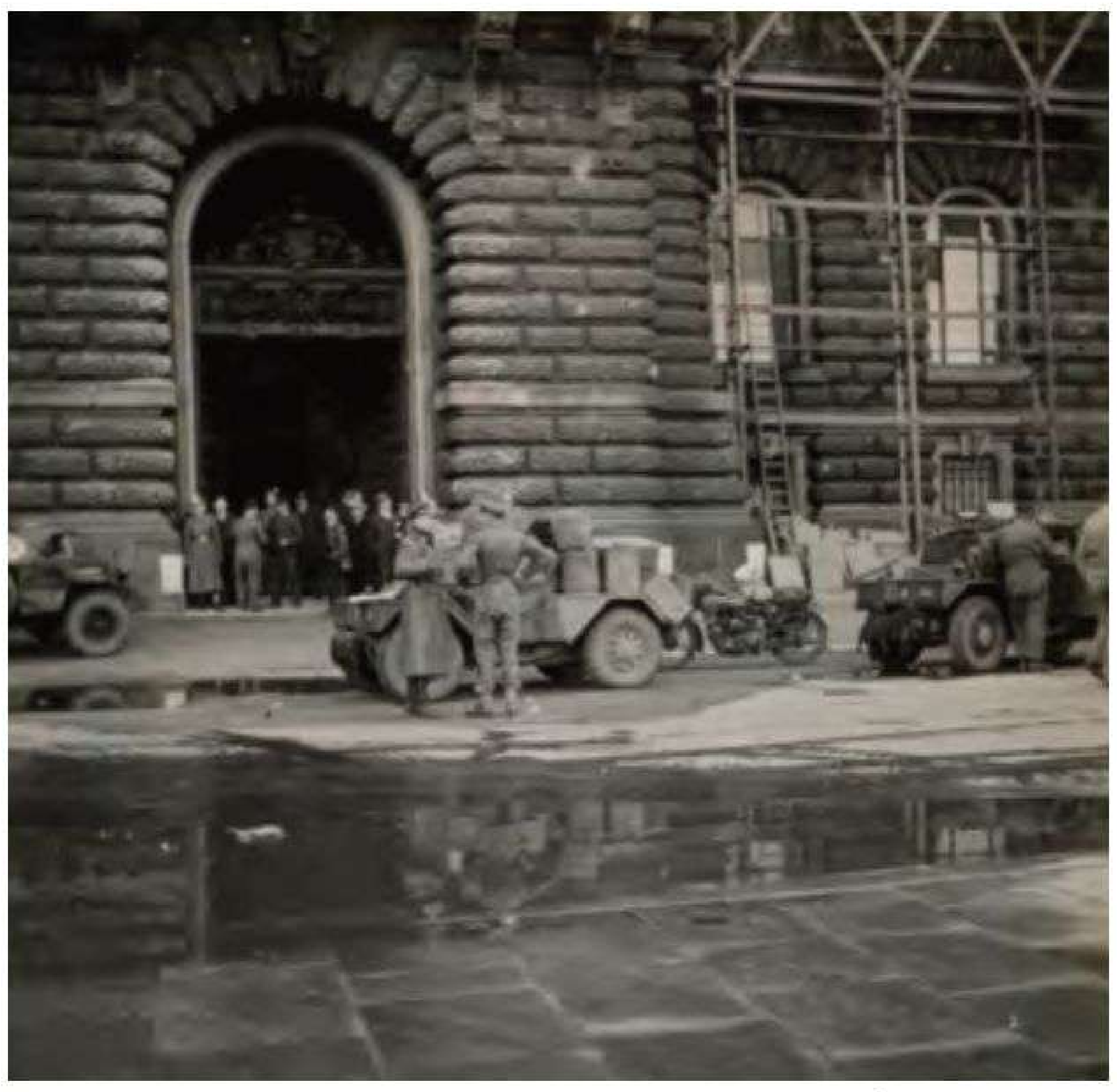
British troops resting by a road sign during the advance towards Hamburg in April and May 1945. (Historic Military Press)

Soon after the British armour started on the last part of its push to Hamburg, this open coupé, complete with a Senior Officer of the British Second Army and "a high-ranking Nazi Officer, who was standing up carrying a white flag", passed Squadron Leader Venning's Jeep and the remainder of the armoured column. It was to lead the convoy in. (Historic Military Press)

Sometime after 16.00 hours on May 3, 1945, the tanks moved off, Squadron Leader Venning's Jeep advancing with them. Less than an hour and a quarter later, having covered the eight or so miles that remained from this point, the lead elements of the column were in Hamburg's main square. (Historic Military Press)

"It was like a city of the dead. By a British order, a forty-eight-hour curfew kept everyone indoors."

A halt was temporarily called at the Neue Elbbrücke, left, at which point Squadron Leader Venning took this picture, before the order was given to proceed and the tanks of the 7th Armoured Division 'raced off'. (Historic Military Press)



At 17.15 hours on May 3, 1945, Lieutenant Colonel Wainman led the 'Cherry Pickers' (11th Hussars, Prince Albert's Own) into Hamburg's main square, pulling up outside the entrance to the Rathaus or Town Hall – seen here. Wainman had arrived in his Daimler Dingo – almost certainly one of those pictured here. Squadron Leader Venning was dressed "in an American combat jacket, a pair of corduroy trousers and an 11th Hussars hat". (HMP)

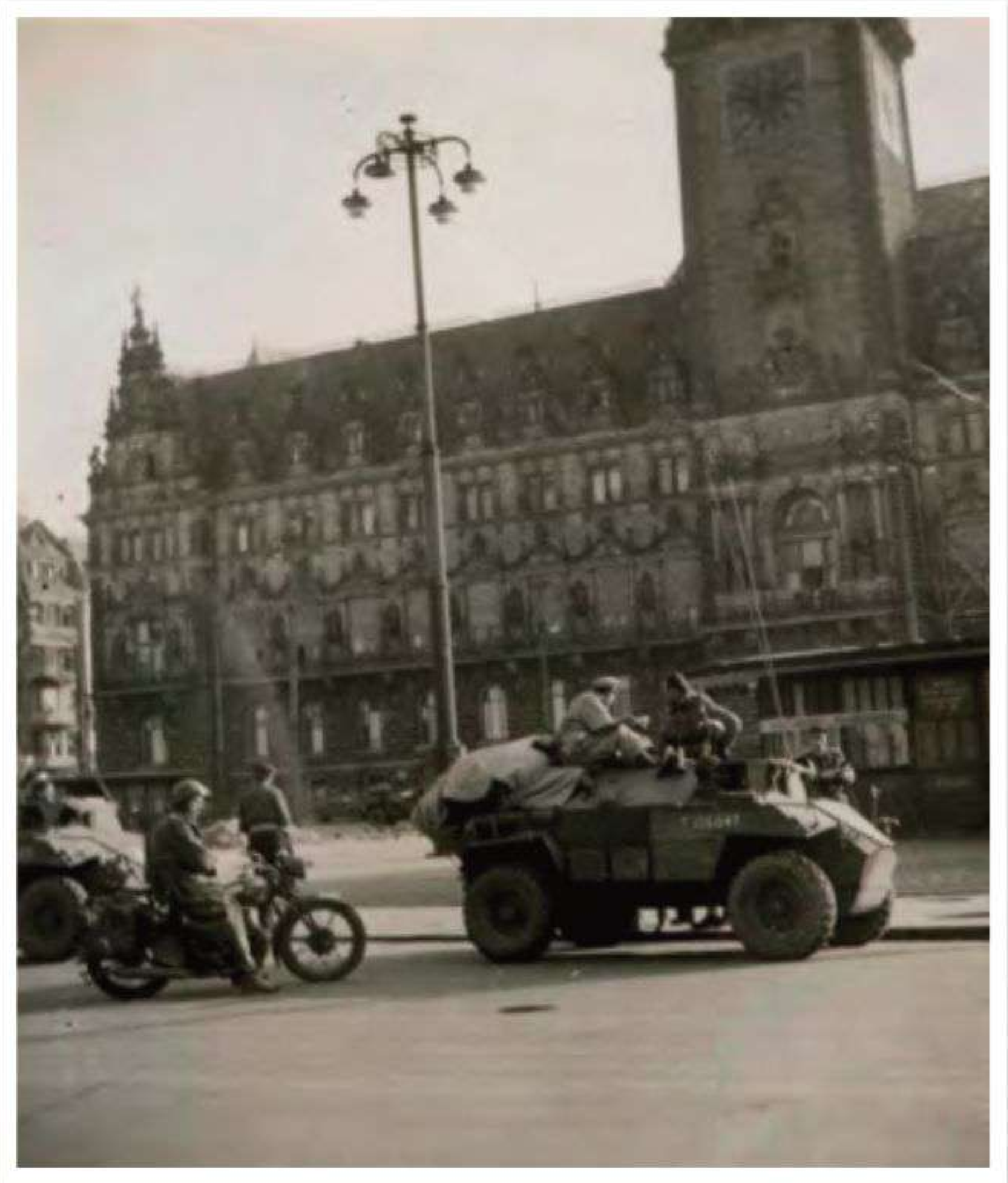
German Army of a northern stronghold and adds emphasis to the reports that the Germans in Denmark are ready to surrender. Hamburg is the first of German cities to be declared open and undefended, says A.P. [Associated Press]. The Secretary of State, Ahrendt, read the official announcement in a dull listless voice. At one point he choked, and remained silent for a few seconds. He spoke very slowly.

"In making the announcement, Hamburg Radio said: 'All public traffic and vehicles must stop when occupation takes place at 12 noon. From 1pm there will be a curfew for the population, with the exception of the staffs of the electricity, gas and other works. The length of curfew will depend on the carrying out of all orders. The Hamburg police will be responsible for the enforcing of the curfew. In case of disobedience the occupation authorities will help in enforcing it.'"[2]

'TERRIBLE DESTRUCTION'

For Edgar, the next 24 hours were full of some of the most 'extraordinary' sights he would ever witness: "Hundreds of German soldiers drifting back, some walking, overburdened with kit, trudging wearily, some on bikes, many hundreds in long convoys of farm carts, some in vans and lorries of all kinds – all trekking back to find someone to give themselves up to. All looked weary, miserable, bedraggled, unshaven, and dirty – and quite often nonplussed."

One of the British soldiers present would later recall that he witnessed "terrible destruction in Hamburg. The roads were badly potholed, and piles of rubble on each side had been made into temporary homes. We were told the Germans dare not try to clear the debris because so many bodies were buried under it – they had no medical supplies to fight the epidemic which would follow."



The 'Cherry Pickers' were closely followed by other units of the Desert Rats – for example the 1/5th Queens and 5th Royal Tank Regiment, many of whom scattered themselves around the main square. (Historic Military Press)

An almost solitary figure dressed in RAF blue amongst a mass of green battledress observes the scene in Hamburg's main square on May 3, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

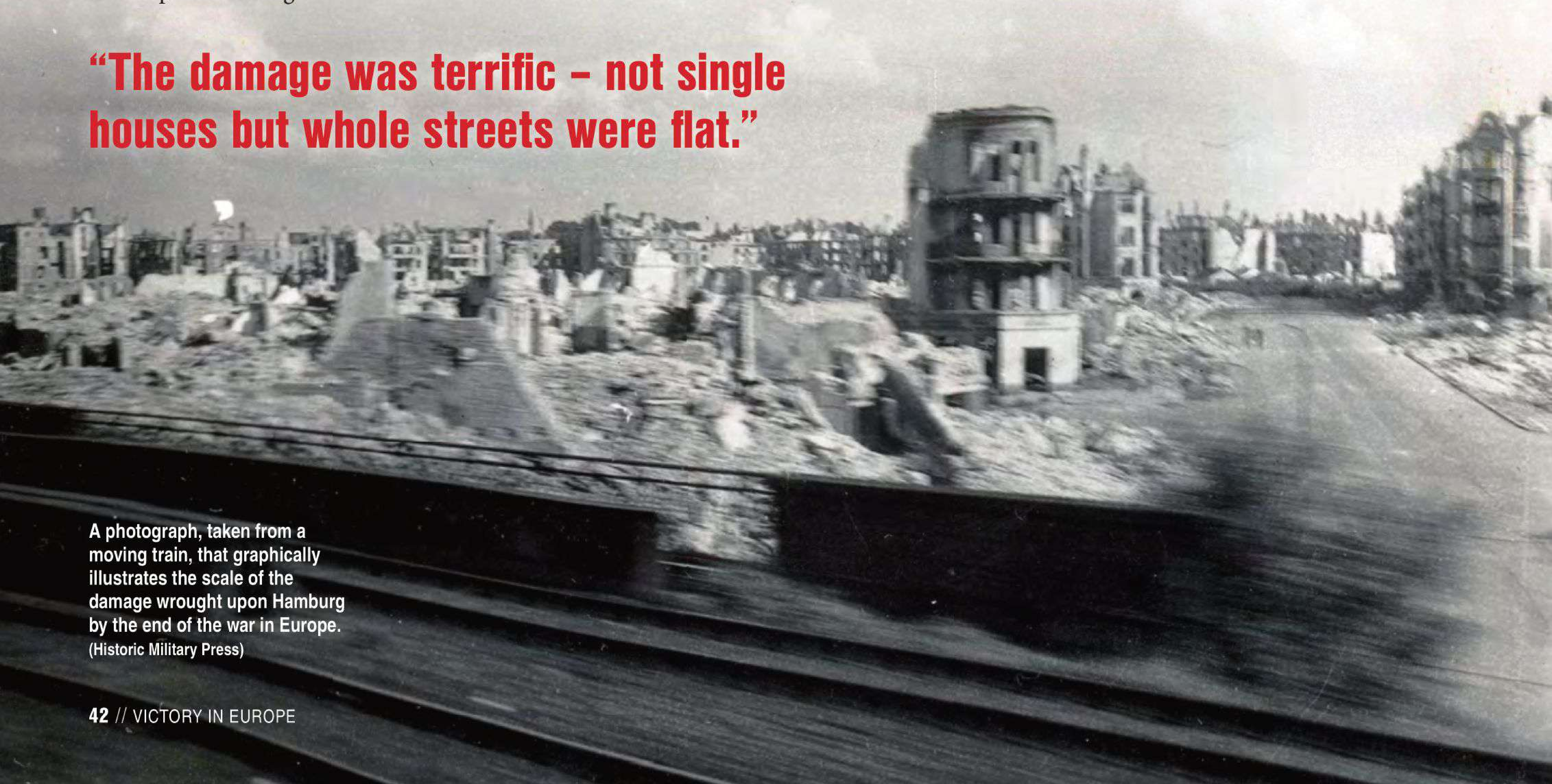
One of the officers in the armoured column with Squadron Leader Venning, Lieutenant Brett-Smith, also kept a diary. In this he noted that "everything the RAF had claimed was true – Hamburg had ceased to exist… yet the streets were absolutely clear… no broken glass, nothing lying about in the streets… But at the same the damage was terrific – not single houses but whole streets were flat."

As the *Gloucester Citizen* account noted, Hamburg had indeed marked the last remaining defence for the Germans in the north of their country. After the British had captured the city, the surviving troops of the 1st Parachute Army along with the remains of Army Group Northwest retreated into the Jutland Peninsula. However, the battle that really signalled the end of the Reich had been taking place some 170 miles southeast in Berlin itself.

NOTES:

1. For more information, see: www.desertrats.org.uk/battles1945.htm.
2. *Gloucester Citizen*, 3 May 1945.

"The damage was terrific – not single houses but whole streets were flat."



A photograph, taken from a moving train, that graphically illustrates the scale of the damage wrought upon Hamburg by the end of the war in Europe. (Historic Military Press)

THE LAST BATTLE

After nearly five years of warfare that had engulfed almost the whole of Europe, the final encounter centred on just one city – Berlin.

More than two-and-a-half-million troops, along with half of the Red Army's armour and a third of all its artillery, divided into three army fronts, had stormed the Seelow Heights to the east of Berlin and swept round to the south and north of the capital of the Third Reich. That the few thousand German soldiers defending Berlin would soon be overwhelmed was in no doubt, but which Soviet commander would be the one to enter the city first was still in question. The matter was the source of bitter rivalry between Marshal Zhukov, Deputy Supreme Commander of the Soviet Armed Forces, with the 1st Byelorussian Front, and Marshal of the Soviet Union Ivan Stepanovich Konev, commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front. In theory, Zhukov was to have the honour of taking Berlin, with Konev providing support. But Konev had other ideas.

What the two marshals would be fighting over was little more than a ruin. Berlin had been the target of 450 raids by the USAAF and the RAF. In total the Allied air forces had dropped 45,517 tons of bombs. The situation worsened on April 20, 1945, when the 1st Byelorussian Front began the assault on Berlin with an artillery barrage which did not stop until the city surrendered. In that time the Soviet guns fired a greater weight of ordnance into the city than all of the Allied air raids combined.

Hitler's chauffeur, Erich Kempa, recalled the Soviets' opening bombardment on April 20: "We could hear the explosions. They rolled nearer like thundering surf… Already the Soviet shelling was hitting the government district. New craters appeared in the Reich Chancellery garden. Splinters whirled around; windowpanes shattered. The air was filled with dust and smoke."[1]

General der Artillerie Helmuth Weidling was the commander of the Berlin Defence Area: "The events of 20 April was the hardest day for my Corps [LVI Panzer Corps] and probably for all the German troops. They had suffered tremendous losses in previous fighting; they were worn down and exhausted and were no longer able to resist the tremendous thrust of the superior Russian forces."[2]

HITLER'S UNHAPPY BIRTHDAY

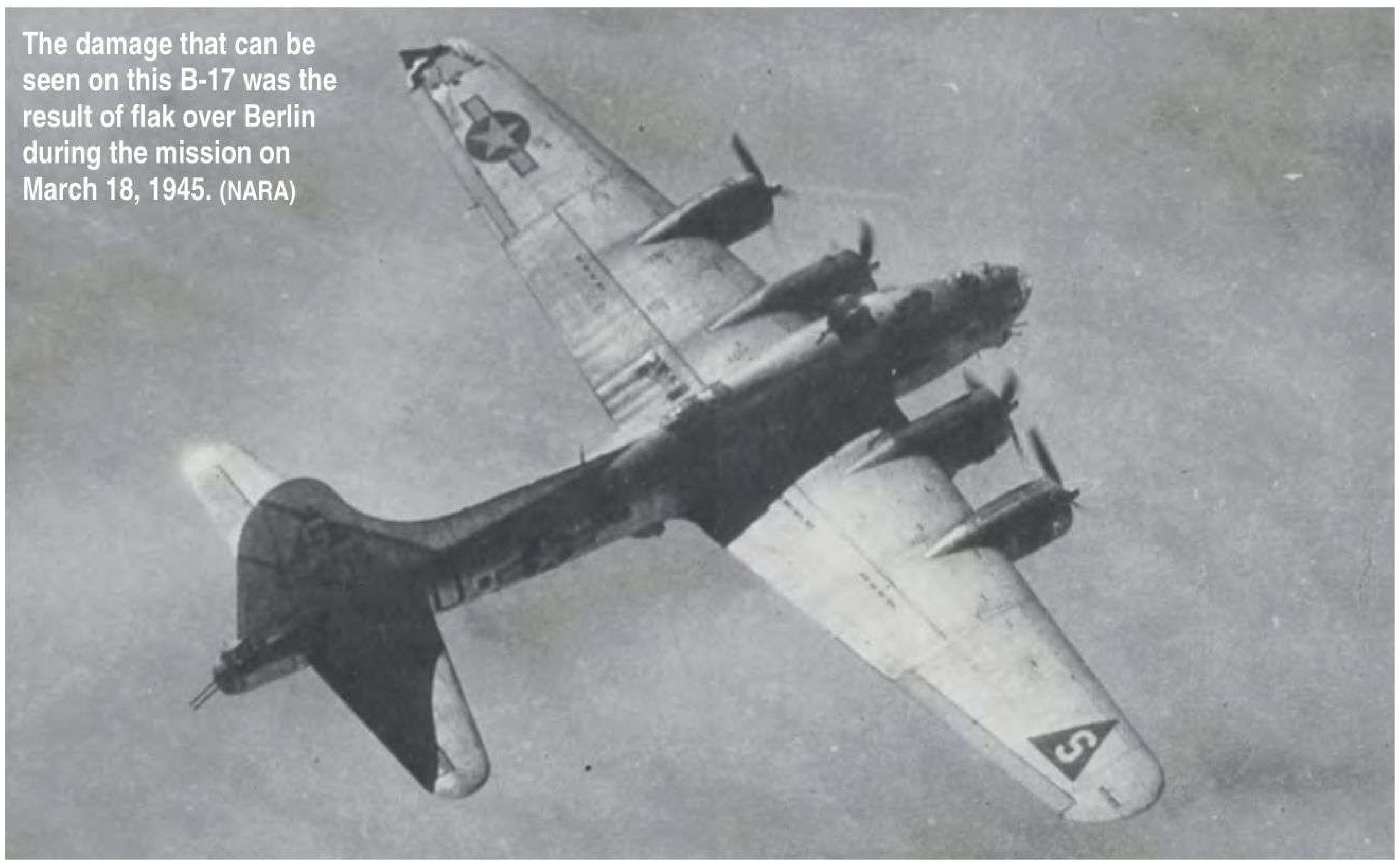
As it happened, April 20 was Hitler's 56th birthday. In the past his birthday had been the cause of much celebration throughout Germany, being heavily promoted and publicised by Goebbels. So, despite the shelling, Hitler resolved to leave the sanctuary of his bunker to show that he was still in Berlin enduring the Soviet attack alongside his people.

That afternoon he climbed up the steps of the bunker to the Chancellery garden to review a detachment of Hitler Youth who had knocked out Soviet tanks on Berlin's eastern approaches. A news camera recorded the event, which showed the Führer, a shaking left arm behind his back, awarding Iron Crosses to the brave youngsters, shaking their hands and patting their cheeks. The actual handing out of the medals was left to his subordinates.

Hitler remained only briefly above ground, soon heading below ground back to the Führerbunker, where Eva Braun had laid on a little improvised party for many of the surviving faithful old followers.

The fighting in Berlin enters its final stages as Russian tanks and troops are pictured near the Brandenburg Gate. (Historic Military Press)

The Allied air forces all played their part in the bombardment of Berlin prior to the Soviet offensive. Here USAAF Boeing B-17G Flying Fortresses of the 91st Bomb Group drop their bombs on Berlin, February 26, 1945. (NARA)



The damage that can be seen on this B-17 was the result of flak over Berlin during the mission on March 18, 1945. (NARA)

Her guests acted as if everything was quite normal, drinking champagne, laughing and dancing, all trying hard to appear as if they were enjoying themselves. It was, of course, Hitler's last birthday party, as indeed it was for a good number of those there that day.

The reality of the situation, however, could not be ignored and those around Hitler urged him to leave the capital while he could still get away and seek sanctuary at his Bavarian retreat in Berchtesgaden. Their pleas had no effect, the Führer being determined to die among the ruins of his Reich. This must have chilled the bones of many of those around him, for if Hitler did not leave, neither could they.

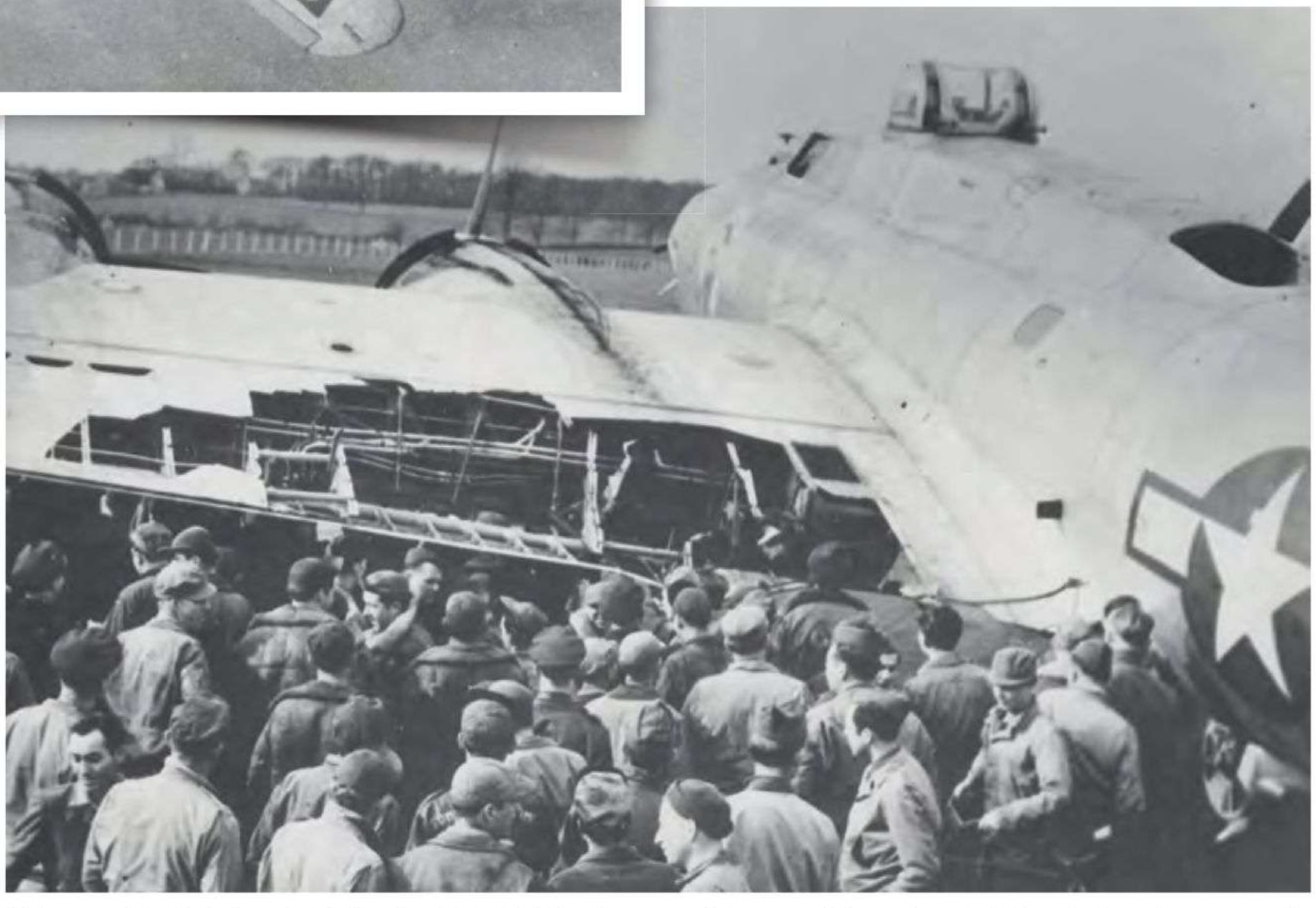
Amid the battered shell of Berlin, the German capital had three defensive rings. The outer ring roughly followed the line of the city boundary; the inner ring was based on the capital's S-Bahn circuit; and, finally, there was the Zitadelle. This was on the island formed by the River Spree and the Landwehr Canal, with outward extensions which encompassed the more important government buildings including the Reich Chancellery and its adjoining bunker. It was from the latter that Hitler, in his spasmodic way, was directing operations, though the defence of the city was in Goebbels' hands, in his post of Gauleiter of Berlin and Reich Commissar for Defence, with Weidling wielding tactical control.

The outer defence ring, which was little more than a trench with a few strong points, ran for some 60 miles and could not be held in strength. As a result, the main concentrations were around roads, which were barricaded and strengthened by infantry positions and a few dug-in old tanks. Local artillery support was available from 20 batteries.

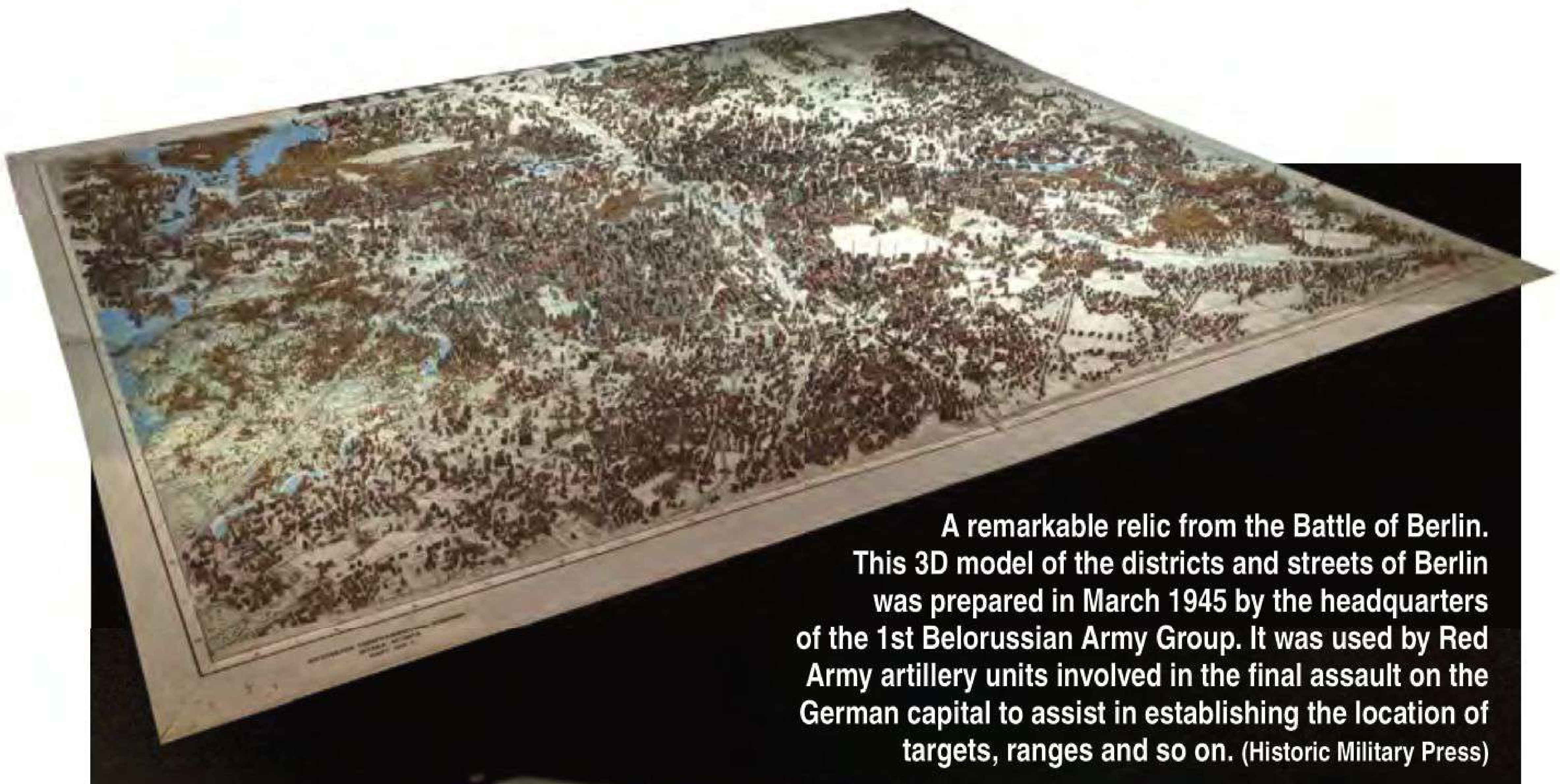
The inner ring had half the circumference of the outer one and was much stronger. The tracks of the S-Bahn, upon which the defences rested, provided a natural barrier, sometimes running along raised steep-sided embankments and at others passing through deep cuttings. All roads that travelled through the ring were barricaded and defended by anti-tank weapons including many 88mm flak guns. Houses close by the barricades had been turned into small fortresses with machine-gun posts in their upper storeys and cellars.

As might be expected, the Zitadelle was the most powerfully defended of the three rings, with a concentration of artillery and tanks, including the fearsome Tiger II.

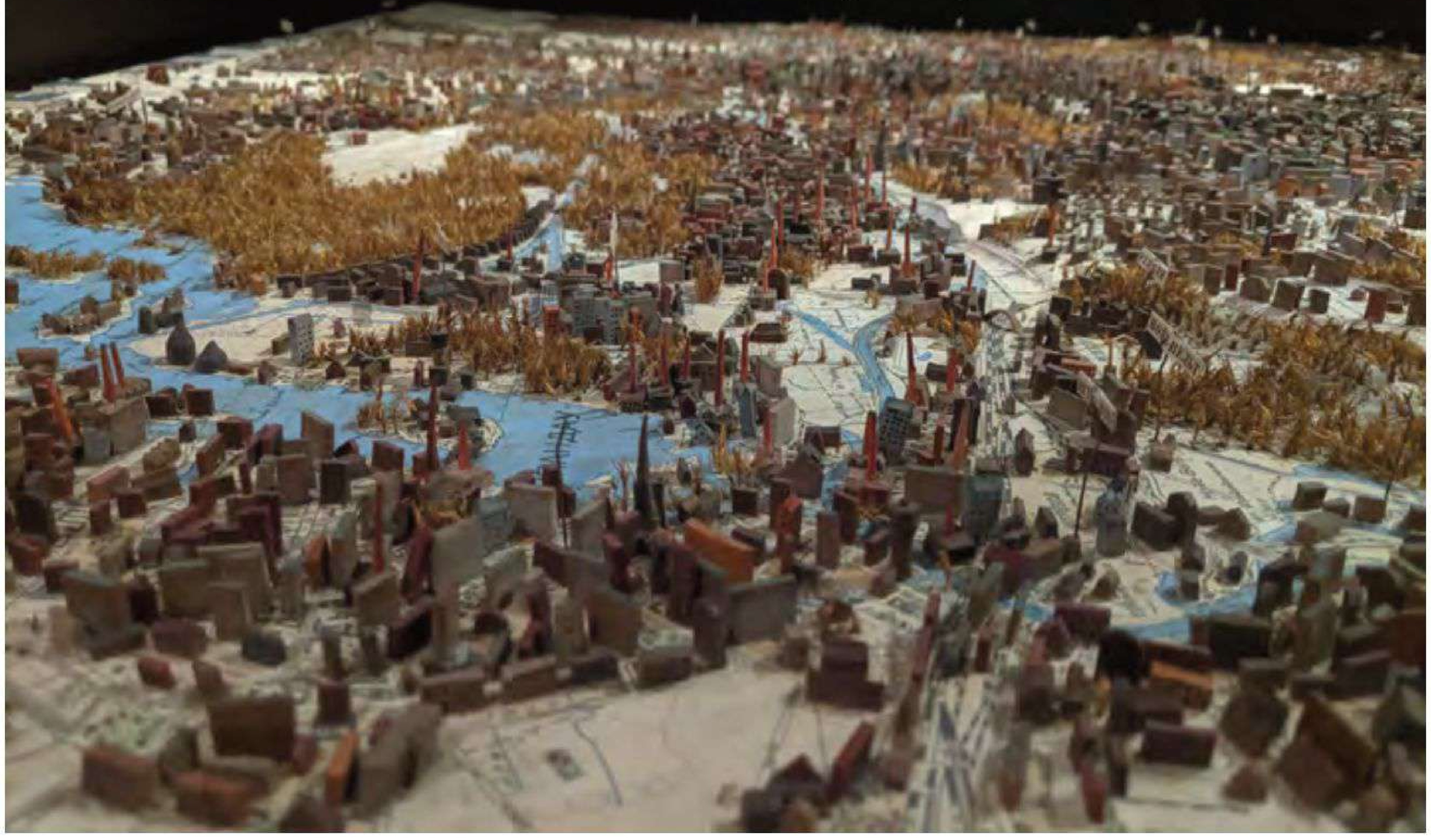
The troops manning these defences were of mixed ability and very unevenly equipped. SS formations were powerfully armed and provided with fuel for their armour and other vehicles. At the other end, the Volkssturm were without uniforms and, in some cases, had rifles but no ammunition.



Nicknamed *Lady B Good*, this Boeing B-17G Flying Fortress (#43-38594) from the 749th Bomb Squadron, part of the 457th Bomb Group USAAF, was damaged by a Messerschmitt Me 262 during a mission to Berlin on March 18, 1945. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Craig P. Greason, nursed his aircraft back to base. (NARA)



A remarkable relic from the Battle of Berlin. This 3D model of the districts and streets of Berlin was prepared in March 1945 by the headquarters of the 1st Belorussian Army Group. It was used by Red Army artillery units involved in the final assault on the German capital to assist in establishing the location of targets, ranges and so on. (Historic Military Press)



A close-up of the model produced by the headquarters of the 1st Belorussian Army Group in March 1945. The large body of water in the left foreground is the Havel, whilst the large area of woodland beyond it, top left, is the Jungfernheide. (Historic Military Press)

There were also groups of the Hitler Youth, the Hitlerjugend, which consisted of boys as young as 12. These youths were liberally supplied with anti-tank weapons in the form of Panzerfausts. They did not stand a chance.

‘THE HOWLING OF THE BOMBS’

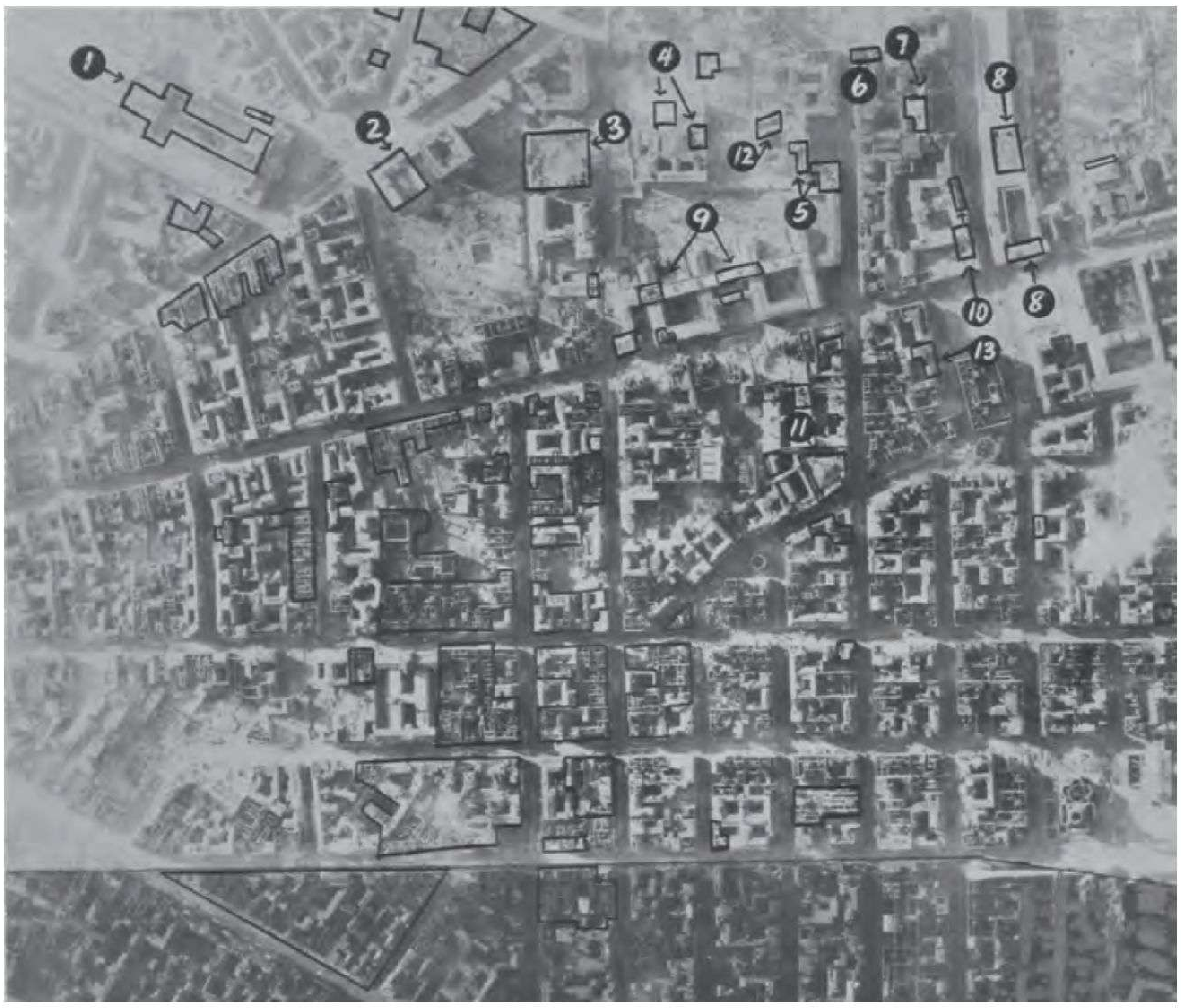
As the Soviet ground forces advanced on Berlin, they found the villages in their path deserted. Evgeni Bessonov, it may be recalled, was a tank commander with the Soviet 4th Tank Army: “The Germans were afraid of us Russian soldiers. Sometimes we saw unfinished hot meals in houses, cattle were abandoned in barns. There were cases when entire families – two or three persons – would commit suicide and hang themselves, afraid of Russian revenge. Most of the villages that we captured were empty; we swept through them without combat, as the Germans had quickly abandoned them.”[3]

With the Soviet troops approaching Berlin, the USAAF and the RAF ceased their bombing offensive against the city, and the Red Air Force took over. Seventeen-year-old Helmut Altner had just been called up and had begun his training on March 30. After less than two weeks in the barracks he was thrown into the front line. After surviving the fighting on the Seelow Heights, he was sent to man the defences in the west of Berlin, being directed to Hakenfelde, in Spandau-West, on April 24. “Slit trenches have been dug into the verges and the foundations of an anti-tank barrier await completion,” he recalled. “On our left the wood piles and sheds of a large sawmill are burning fiercely, throwing a bright light across the street… [an] aircraft clatters over and we throw ourselves down and wait for the howling of the bombs, which hit the burning sheds and scatter sparks, sending burning planks whirling into the air. And again, one hears the tacking of the engine as the plane flies at its target, the whistling and the exploding bombs.

“The street is lit up as light as day. We press ourselves tight against the wire mesh fence, as if it could give us cover, clutching at the earth with our fingers. Across the street the bombs continue to strike into the flames, whipping them up even higher. Our hearts beat wildly, praying for it all to end. Then it quietens down as the humming of the aircraft engine dwindles in the distance.”

The aerial attacks were incessant. “We brush the sand off our uniforms and march on. An apartment block looms out of the night on the left, and on the right a vast building with hundreds of windows reflects the flames. A long, high brick wall separates the Hakenfelde Aircraft Instrument Factory from the street. Suddenly the hum of aircraft engines returns, and they are overhead again.

“The roaring resumes and we throw ourselves down, pressing tight against the brick wall and wait, wait as we have already done so often. Then come the bangs and splintering as the bombs strike the



The state that the Russians found the German capital in during their offensive is clear to see in this aerial reconnaissance picture dated February 8, 1945. Showing the Wilhelmstrasse area of Berlin, the locations marked include: Anhalter Station (1); Herman Goering’s office as chief of the German Air Force (4); Prussia House (5); State Railway Directorate (7); Reich Presidential Chancellery (8); Air Ministry (9); Ministry of Transport (10); and Goering’s office as President of Prussia (12). (NARA)

Red Army troops pictured during the bitter house to house to fighting that often characterised the Battle for Berlin. (Historic Military Press)

stone colossus next to us. Splinters and masonry shower down around us, falling on our steel helmets and our bodies. The explosions in the street go on and on… At last it is quiet. We run across the street and dive into the building, then go down the steps into the cellar… Outside the bombing has started again."[4]

On the morning of April 21 Konev achieved his goal of being first into Berlin, as the component brigades of the 12th Guards Tank Corps were the first Soviet units to break into the city. Zhukov's troops were not far behind, the 3rd Shock Army entering the suburb of Weissensee. "Twelve assault tanks appeared," wrote Colonel Pierre Rocolle, "flanked left and right by infantry, approximately one company, armed with submachine-guns and spraying the walls of houses whilst moving from door to door at the double. They were followed by anti-aircraft guns. Behind these assault troops came carts drawn by two or four horses, containing food and ammunition as well as loot."[5]

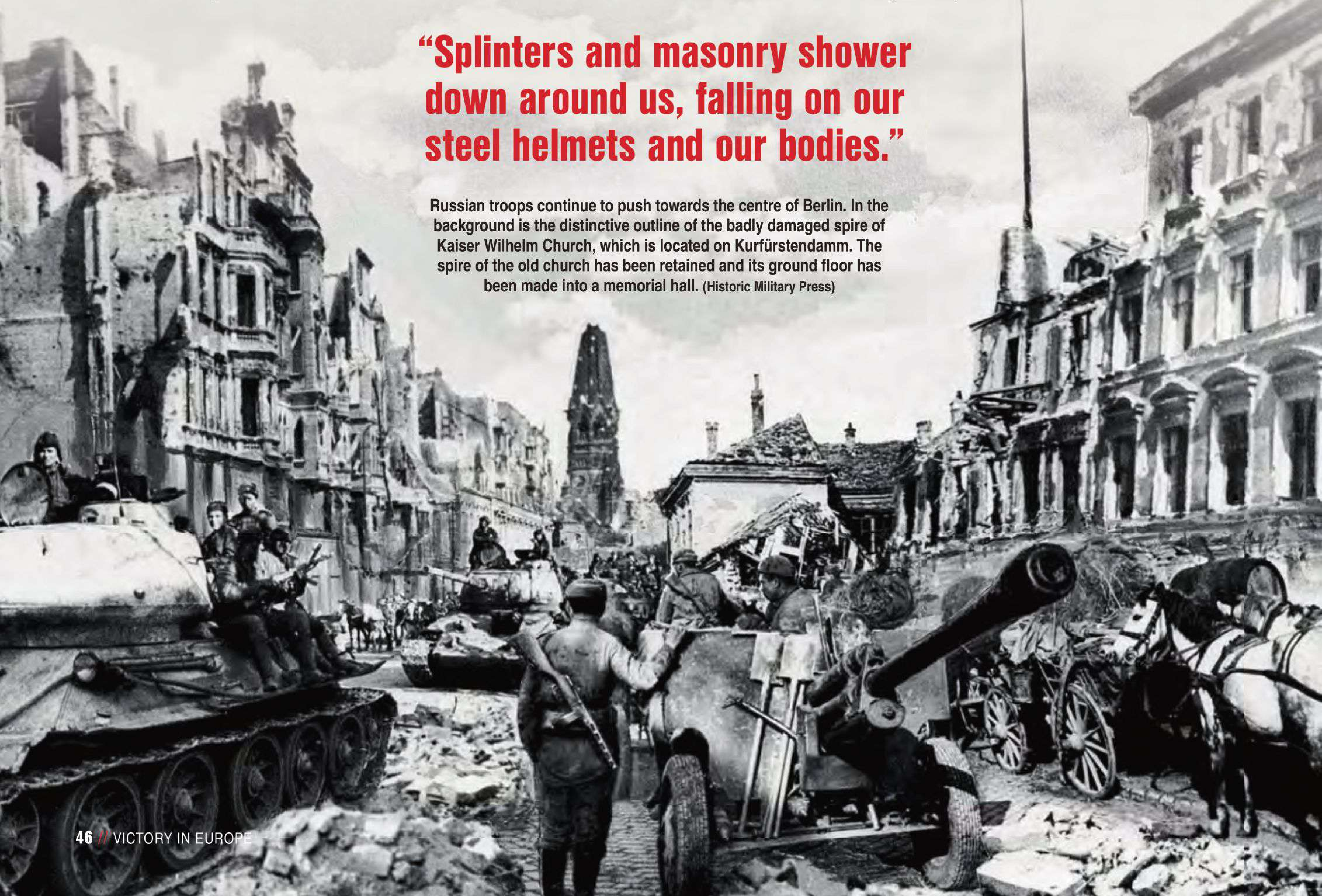
The fighting would become more intense and the defence more stubborn as the Red Army moved ever closer to the heart of Berlin. The attackers were told to show no mercy to the Germans, it being declared that there was no such person as an innocent German.

One of those Germans, Berliner Claus Fuhrman, watched how the Soviet troops enthusiastically followed those instructions: "The first women were fleeing from the northern parts of the city and some of them sought shelter in our cellar, sobbing that the Russians were looting all the houses, abducting the men and raping all the women and girls… After the first wave of combat troops, there followed reserves and supply troops who 'liberated' us in the true Russian manner. At our street corner I saw two Russian soldiers assaulting a crying elderly woman and then raping her in full view of the stunned crowd."[6]

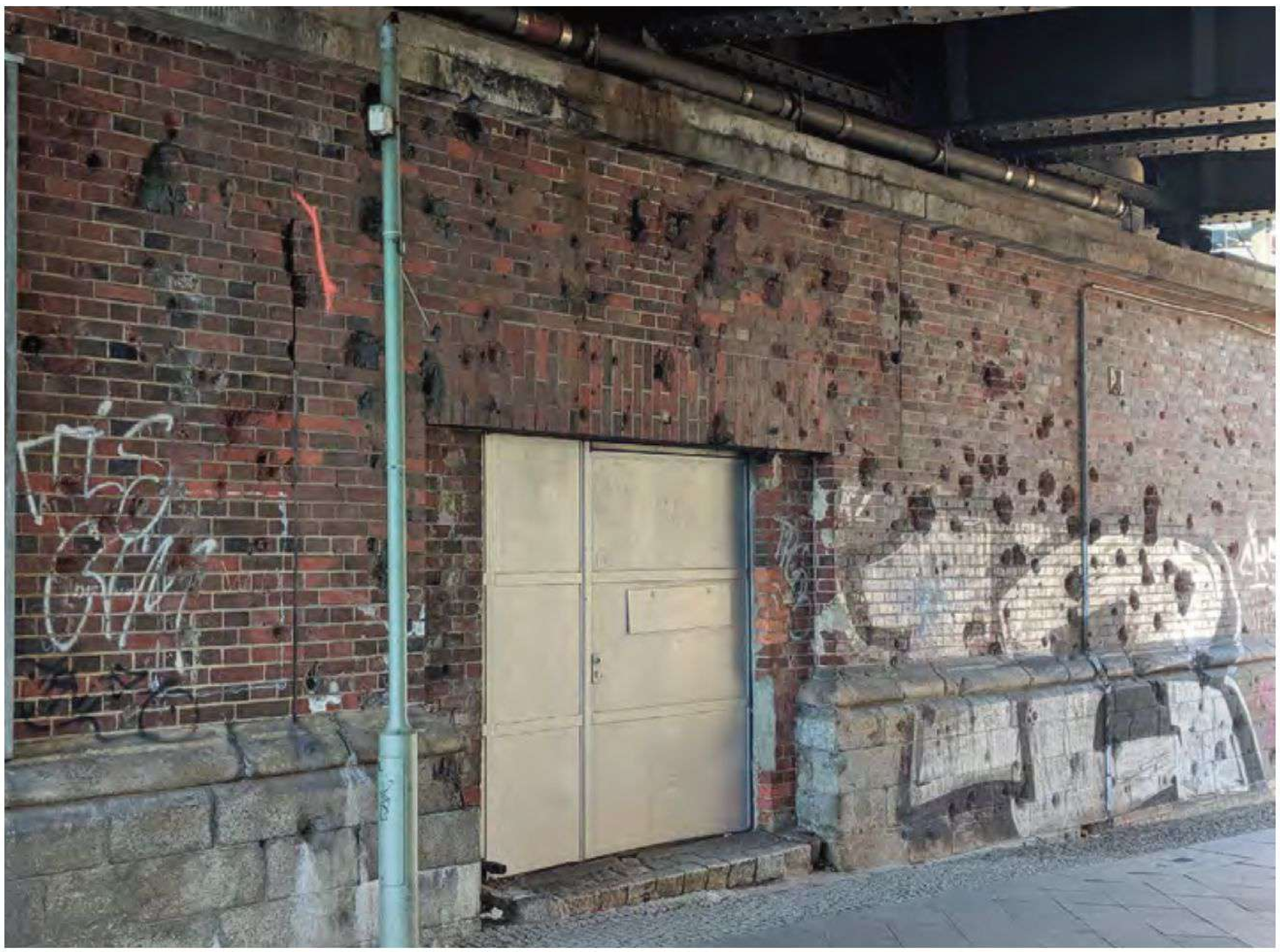
The total number of women raped by Soviet troops almost defies imagination. Based on surging abortion rates in the following months and contemporary hospital reports, at least 100,000 women in Berlin are believed to have suffered such a fate.[7]

On April 22, both the 1st Byelorussian Front and the 1st Ukrainian Front consolidated their positions in Berlin's suburbs. At the same time the 5th Shock Army, the 1st Guards Tank Army and the 8th Guards Army were brought forward into the northeastern suburbs, as well as the 3rd Guards Tank Army and the 28th Army respectively.

"Splinters and masonry shower down around us, falling on our steel helmets and our bodies."



Russian troops continue to push towards the centre of Berlin. In the background is the distinctive outline of the badly damaged spire of Kaiser Wilhelm Church, which is located on Kurfürstendamm. The spire of the old church has been retained and its ground floor has been made into a memorial hall. (Historic Military Press)



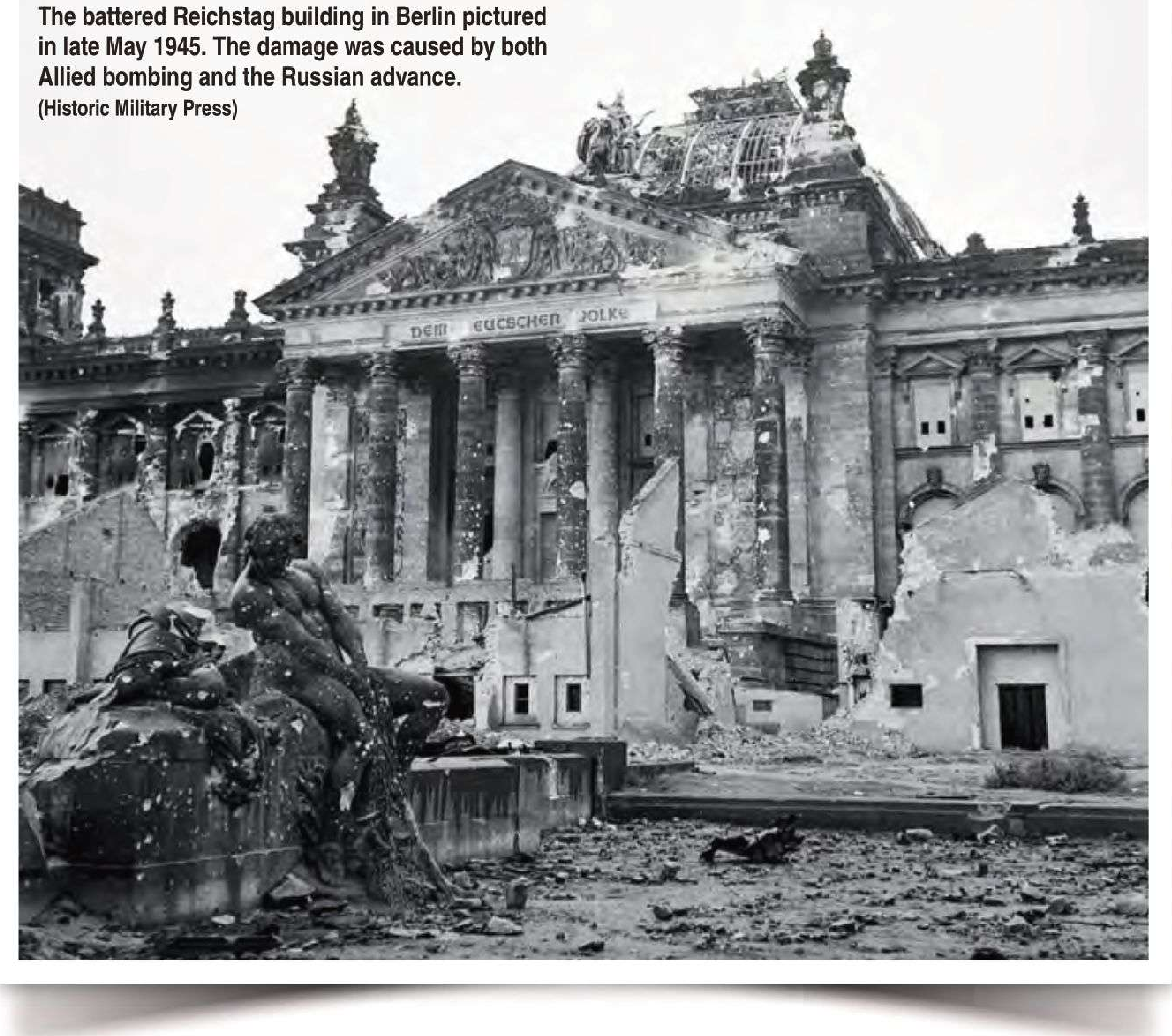
Extensive battle damage can still be seen on the railway bridge at the western end of Reinhardtstrasse in Berlin. The bridge carried the S-Bahn over the road and is likely, therefore, to have been part of the German capital's inner defensive ring. The Russian troops would have been advancing from the right of this view. (Historic Military Press)

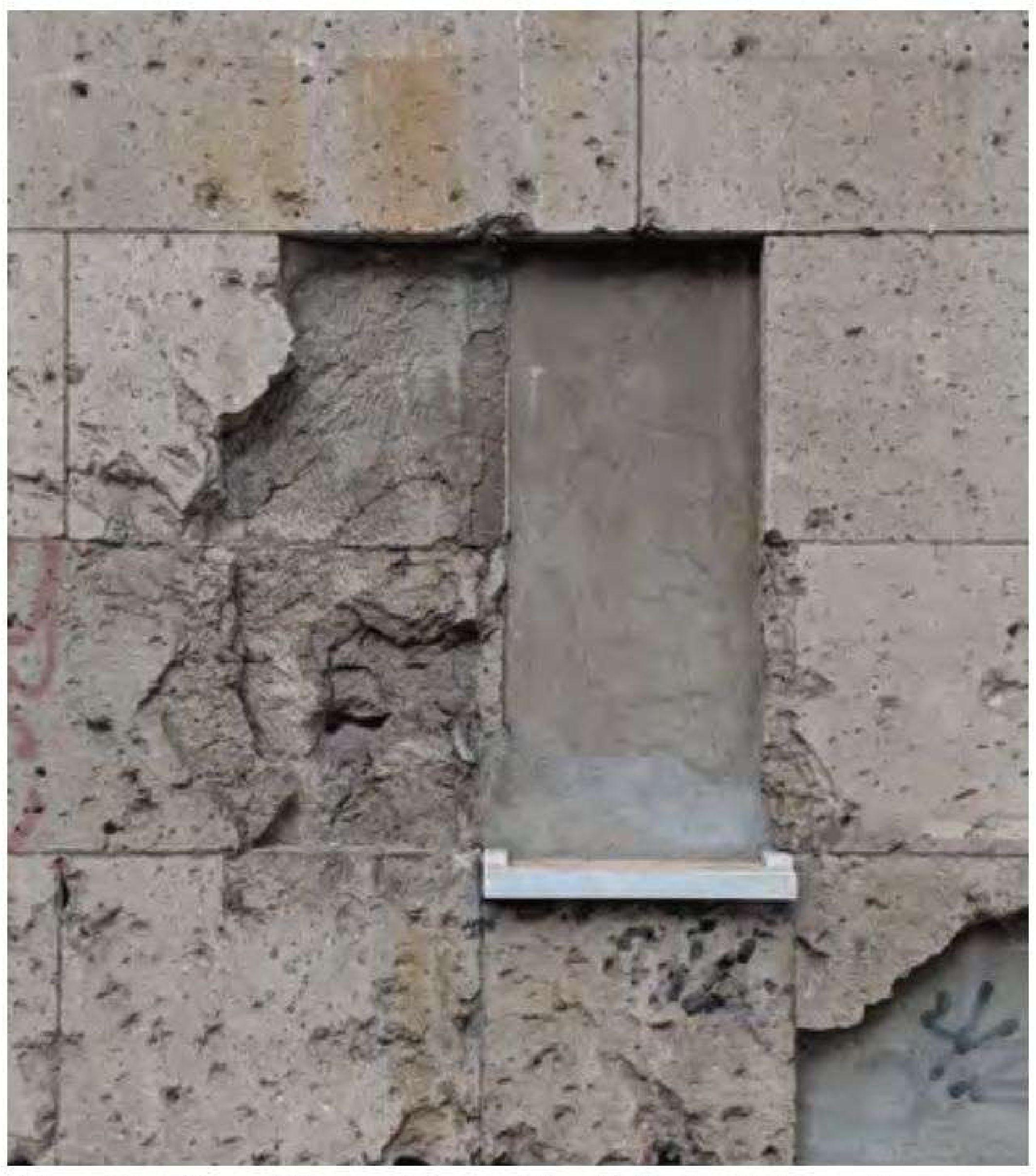
A close-up of the damage to the S-Bahn bridge in Berlin's Reinhardtstrasse. (Historic Military Press)

DISOBEYING ORDERS

Though the fate of Berlin was sealed, Hitler, whose mental health had deteriorated as much as his physical well-being, still deluded himself with visions of a counterattack which would save his capital. This attack was supposed to be delivered by Army Group Steiner, then stationed to the northeast of Berlin. While, in Hitler's imagination, this was a powerful army group, the reality was that it was no more than corps strength with few heavy weapons. At the most, SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner commanded 11,000 exhausted men with less than 50 tanks, half of which were out of fuel. He was promised a reinforcement of 5,000 men from Luftwaffe ground personnel and Hitler Youth. But Steiner would not commit these inadequately equipped men and boys to a combat where they would be slaughtered: "I refused to use the indescribable bands of soldiers which had been so hurriedly assembled; I did not want to lose a single man in an enterprise which was doomed to crushing disaster from the beginning."

The battered Reichstag building in Berlin pictured in late May 1945. The damage was caused by both Allied bombing and the Russian advance. (Historic Military Press)





About half a mile east from the S-Bahn bridge in Reinhardtstrasse is further evidence of the fighting around Berlin's inner defensive ring. The building seen here, located in Georgenstrasee, to the east of Friedrichstrasse Station, is directly underneath the same S-Bahn line that crosses Reinhardtstrasse. (Historic Military Press)

Steiner also refused to send his own troops into battle under the circumstances with which he was faced. "I had nothing with which to attack," he concluded. "The three divisions in reserve at Schorfheide had already been swallowed up attempting to stop the Russian juggernaut rolling westwards. Two new divisions that Army Group Vistula had promised never arrived… The plan of attack was based on facts that had no basis in reality, but only in the fantasies of the Chancellery."[8] Steiner was taking a considerable risk, as Hitler had made it abundantly clear that officers "who do not comply unconditionally with this order are to be arrested and shot immediately".

On April 22, at the afternoon situation conference in the Führerbunker, Generaloberst Heinrici, in command of Army Group Vistula holding the northern limits of the city, told Hitler that Steiner could not come to the relief of Berlin and that IX Army in

Да здравствует
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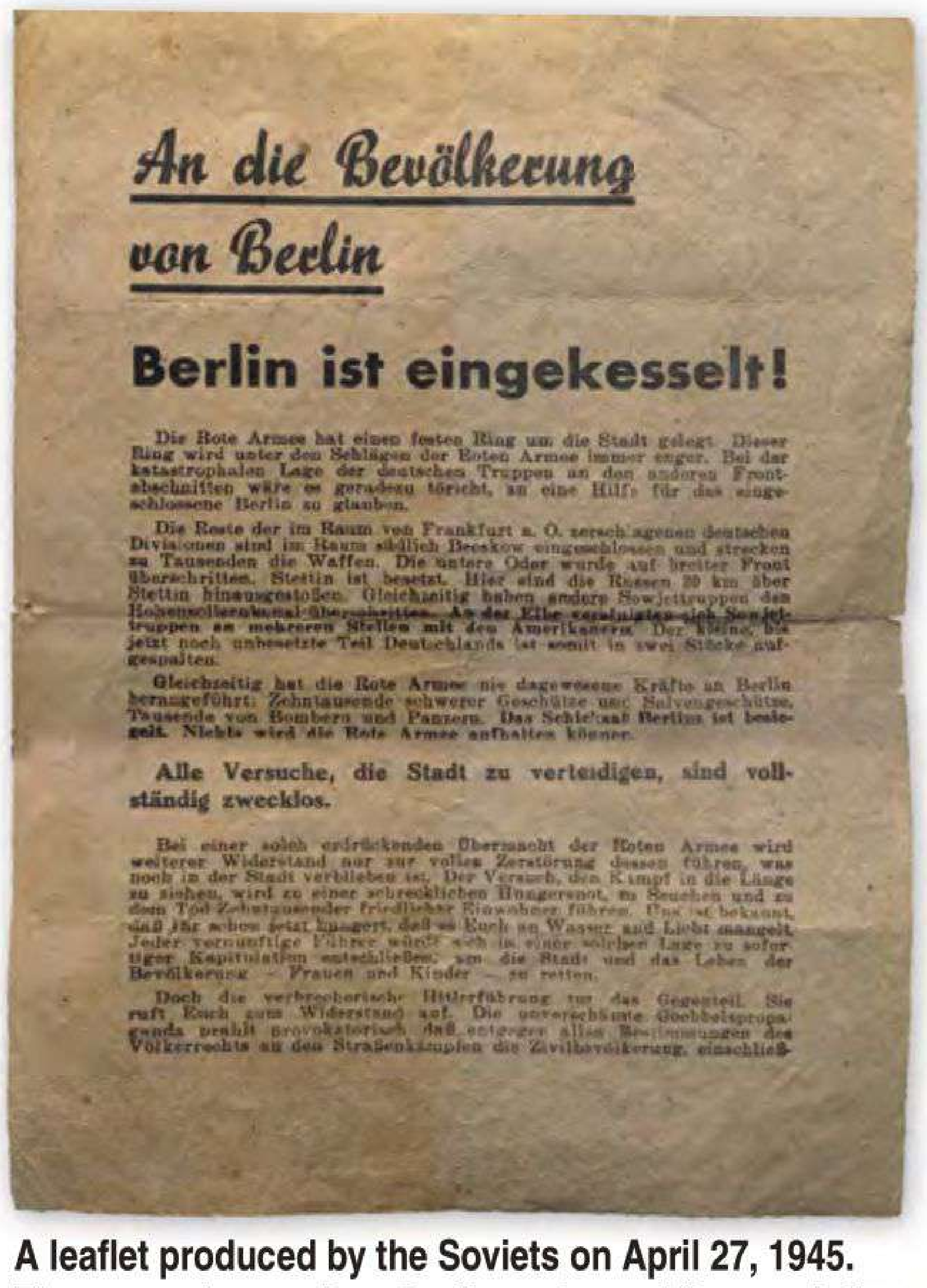
Мая

A female Red Army soldier on what appears to be traffic duties in the battered streets of Berlin. (Historic Military Press)



An die Bevölkerung von Berlin

Berlin ist eingekesselt!

Die Rote Armee hat einen festen Ring um die Stadt gelegt. Dieser Ring wird unter den Schlägen der Roten Armee immer enger. Bei der katastrophalen Lage der deutschen Truppen an den anderen Frontabschnitten wäre es geradezu töricht, an eine Hilfe für das eingeschlossene Berlin zu glauben.

Die Reste der im Raum von Frankfurt a. O. zerschlagenen deutschen Divisionen sind im Raum südlich Beeskow eingeschlossen und strecken zu Tausenden die Waffen. Die untere Oder wurde auf breiter Front überschritten. Stettin ist besetzt. Hier sind die Russen 20 km über Stettin hinausgestoßen. Gleichzeitig haben andere Sowjettruppen den Hohenzollernkanal überschritten. **An der Elbe vereinigten sich Sowjettruppen an mehreren Stellen mit den Amerikanern.** Der kleine, bis jetzt noch unbesetzte Teil Deutschlands ist somit in zwei Stücke aufgespalten.

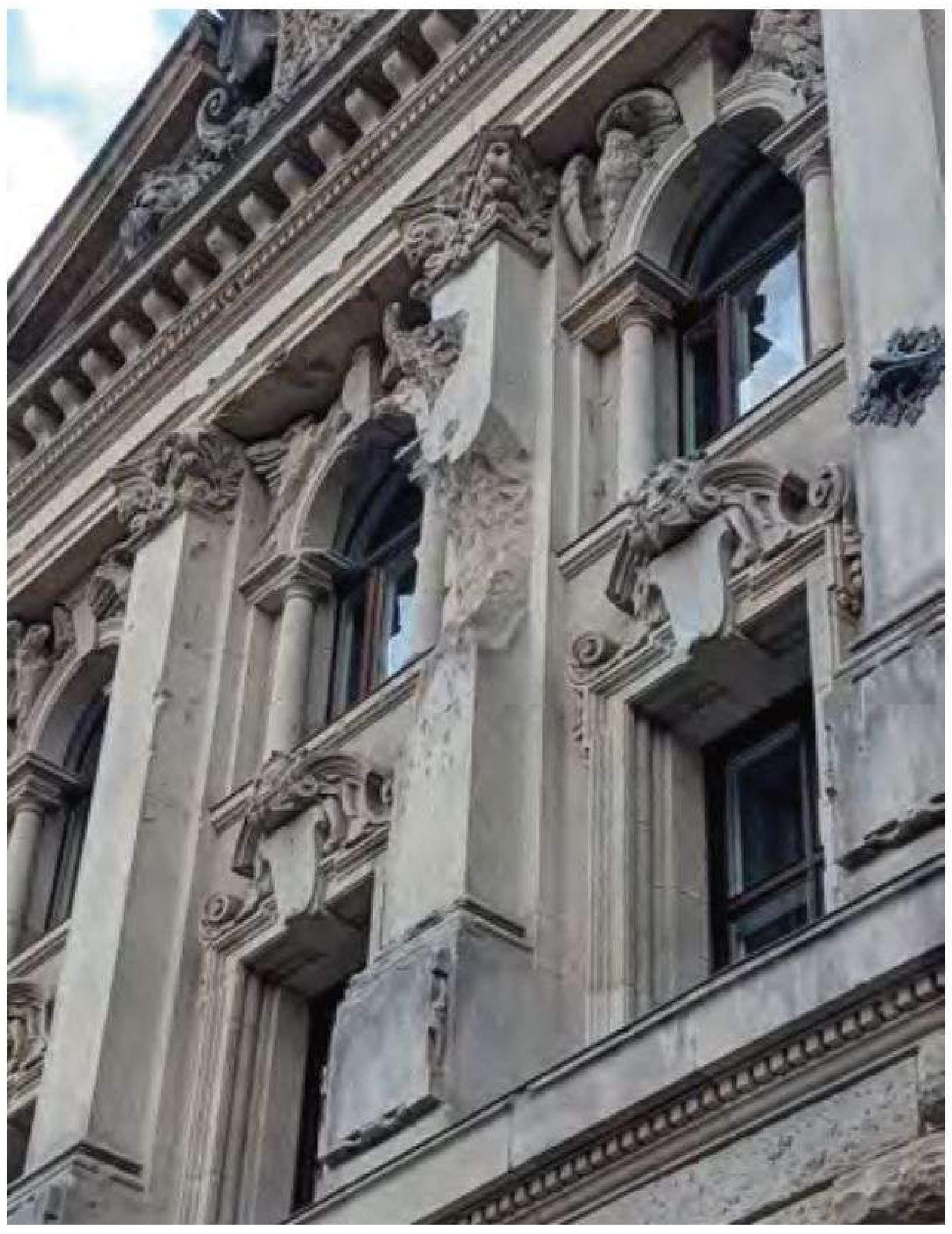
Gleichzeitig hat die Rote Armee nie dagewesene Kräfte an Berlin herangeführt: Zehntausende schwerer Geschütze und Salvengeschütze, Tausende von Bombern und Panzern. **Das Schicksal Berlins ist besiegelt. Nichts wird die Rote Armee aufhalten können.**

Alle Versuche, die Stadt zu verteidigen, sind vollständig zwecklos.

Bei einer solch erdrückenden Übermacht der Roten Armee wird weiterer Widerstand nur zur vollen Zerstörung dessen führen, was noch in der Stadt verblieben ist. Der Versuch, den Kampf in die Länge zu ziehen, wird zu einer schrecklichen Hungersnot, zu Seuchen und zu dem Tod Zehntausender friedlicher Einwohner führen. Uns ist bekannt, daß Ihr schon jetzt hungert, daß es Euch an Wasser und Licht mangelt. Jeder vernünftige Führer würde sich in einer solchen Lage zu sofortiger Kapitulation entschließen, um die Stadt und das Leben der Bevölkerung – Frauen und Kinder – zu retten.

Doch die verbrecherische Hitlerführung tut das Gegenteil. Sie ruft Euch zum Widerstand auf. Die unverschämte Goebbelspropaganda prahlt provokatorisch, daß entgegen allen Bestimmungen des Völkerrechts an den Straßenkämpfen die Zivilbevölkerung einschließ-

A leaflet produced by the Soviets on April 27, 1945. They were dropped on Berlin and urged its population and defenders to cease resistance and surrender. (Historic Military Press)



Battle damage to the façade of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (the Berlin Social Science Centre), which is located on the north side of Reichpietschufer. This road is, in turn, on the north bank of the Landwehr Canal and therefore this building faced the Russian troops' advance. (Historic Military Press)

Two elderly Berlin residents, one wearing an armband signifying that he is blind, sit on a crate amid the rubble caused by the fighting in Berlin, May 1945. (Everett Historical/Shutterstock)

the north was in danger of being surrounded by the Soviets unless it immediately retreated westwards. Hitler exploded in a ferocious rant. "Everyone has lied to me," he raged. "Everyone has deceived me; no one has told me the truth. The armed forces have lied to me and now the SS has left me in the lurch. The German people has not fought heroically. It deserves to perish. It is not I who have lost the war, but the German people."

It was at that point that Hitler admitted to himself and to others that all was lost. He told Generaloberst Alfred Jodl that he would "fight as long as I have a single soldier. When the last soldier deserts me. I will shoot myself."

Others were also beginning to defy the orders of the German high command. General der Truppengattung Walther Wenck's 12th Army, which as it may be recalled had tried to help the 9th Army break out of the Halbe Pocket, was ordered to move down from its positions facing the Americans on the Elbe and attack the encircling Soviet forces. "Liberate Berlin!", Wenck was instructed by the Deputy Supreme Commander of the German Armed Forces, Wilhelm Keitel. "Turn all your available forces around. Link up with the 9th Army. Get the Führer out. Wenck, you are the only one who can save Germany!" Wenck, though, had little intention of doing anything of the sort: "The fate of a single individual [Hitler] is no longer of any significance."

Wenck told his officers exactly how he would respond. He knew that he had to be careful not to get caught disobeying orders from Hitler, for he was only too aware of what would happen to him. This, then, was his plan: "We will drive as close to Berlin as we can, but we will not give up our positions on the Elbe. With our flanks on the river we keep open a channel of escape to the west. It would be nonsense to drive towards Berlin only to be encircled by the Russians." He did send his 20th Corps to Potsdam in the hope, it seems, of creating an escape route for Berliners, but the encircling Soviet forces blocked any such corridor of hope. By his actions, Wenck managed to save many of his men who would otherwise have been slaughtered.

One man who did deliver a counterattack was Weidling with his LVI Panzer Corps. But this was easily repulsed by the Soviets and, by the evening of April 24, the Soviets had reached the S-Bahn circuit of the inner defensive ring.

‘THE SCREAMING, GUN-WIELDING WOMEN’

Dorothea von Schwanenfluegel was 29 years old when, on April 24, 1945, she witnessed the penetration of the S-Bahn defensive ring by the Red Army: “At exactly 5.20 p.m., our house was rocked by a barrage of Russian bombs and we in the basement were shaken so violently that we feared we would be buried alive like animals in their holes. A deep crater yawned in the street, roof tiles were flung all over the garden, windows were shattered, and cracks appeared in the front brick wall.

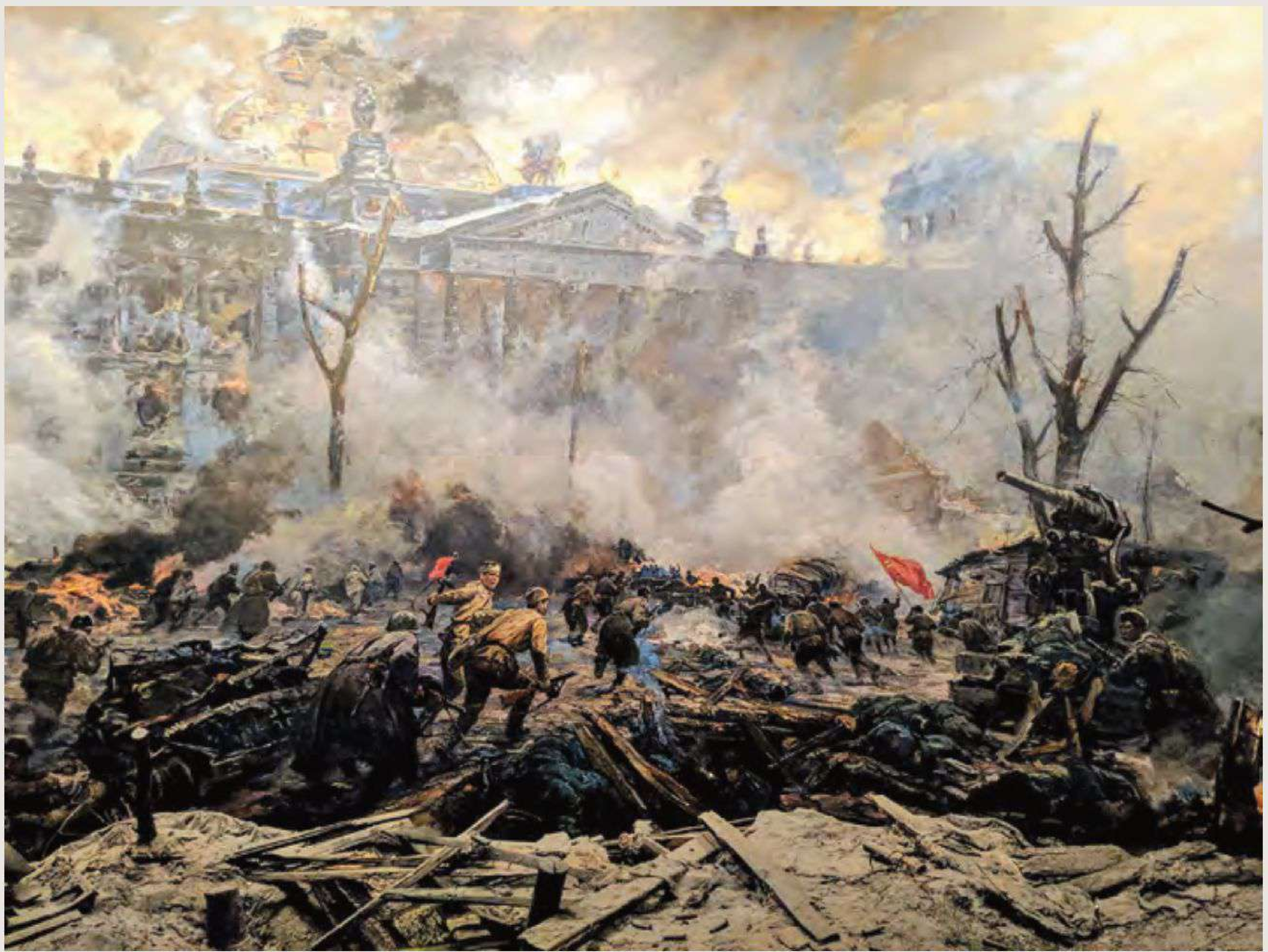
“Shortly thereafter… the Soviets battled the German soldiers and drafted civilians street by street until we could hear explosions and rifle fire right in our immediate vicinity. As the noise got closer, we could even hear the horrible guttural screaming of the Soviet soldiers which sounded to us like enraged animals. Shots shattered our windows and shells exploded in our garden, and suddenly the Soviets were on our street.

“Shaken by the battle around us and numb with fear, we watched from behind the small cellar windows facing the street as the tanks and an endless convoy of troops rolled by... It was a terrifying sight as they sat high upon their tanks with their rifles cocked, aiming at houses as they passed. The screaming, gun-wielding women were the worst. Half of the troops had only rags and tatters around their feet, while others wore SS boots that had been looted from a conquered SS barrack.”[9]

The S-Bahn circuit actually proved a difficult barrier to break through, and it took the Russians two days to do so. But already Konev’s and Zhukov’s armies were linking up, with the 3rd Guards Tank Army and the 28th Army pushing in towards the centre of the city from the south, the 3rd and 5th Shock armies and the 1st Guards Tank Army moving in from the east, and the 2nd Guards Tank Army from the north. At the western end of the city, heavy fighting raged near Potsdam as the 4th Guards Tank Army joined forces with the 47th Army.

On April 25, the 1st Byelorussian Front and the 1st Ukrainian Front became firmly wedded together, completely isolating the centre of Berlin. The final, calamitous, phase of the Battle of Berlin was about to begin.

The following day, a combined force of some 460,000 soldiers, supported by 12,000 artillery pieces, 1,500 tanks and the aircraft of the 16th and 18th Air Armies launched their assault on the 300,000 defenders still in the city.[10] Tempelhof Airport was taken and the Soviets advanced up to the Landwehr, with the defenders pulling back towards the Zitadelle. The Old Reichstag and the Chancellery building were now under direct threat. Squeezed into the city centre were about 10,000 soldiers, who had been



A section of an impressive diorama entitled *Attack on the Reichstag*. Created in 1967 by the renowned Grekov Studio in Moscow, it graphically depicts the final Red Army assault on the Reichstag on April 30, 1945. The full diorama can be seen in the German-Russian Museum at Karlshorst in Berlin. (Historic Military Press)

A Russian photographer at work as Red Army tanks and soldiers congregate in front of the Brandenburg Gate. (Historic Military Press)

“Shots shattered our windows and shells exploded in our garden.”

Ilyushin IL 2 Stormoviks of the Soviet 16th Air Army over Berlin in the spring of 1945. (Courtesy of Oleg Rastrenin)

ordered to fight to the last man. Some, though, tried to escape - but any who were caught by the SS ran the risk of being shot or hanged, stripped of their uniforms, on the nearest tree with placards on their chests which read: "We betrayed the Führer."

FLYING THE FLAG

On the night of the 28th, the 10th Guards Tank Corps launched an attack across the Teltow Canal in the south, followed by the taking of the Potsdam 'island'. The following day, the Soviet forces broke though at numerous points, though still taking heavy casualties as many of the defenders did their duty and died at their posts. An anonymous German staff officer left an account of the last few days of the battle: "The whole large expanse of Potsdamer Platz is a waste of ruins. Masses of damaged vehicles, half-smashed trailers of the ambulances with the wounded still in them. Dead people everywhere, many of them frightfully cut up by tanks and trucks… Shell crater on shell crater every way I look. The streets are streaming. The smell of the dead is at times unbearable… Every so often, women burst out of a cellar, their fists pressed over their ears, because they cannot stand the screaming of the wounded."[11]

Flanking the main steps to the Martin-Gropius-Bau on Niederkirchner Strasse in Berlin is a pair of battle-damaged statues – one of which is seen here. Both were damaged in the fighting in the area in April and May 1945, and were subsequently left, headless and limbless, as a reminder of the Battle of Berlin. (Historic Military Press)

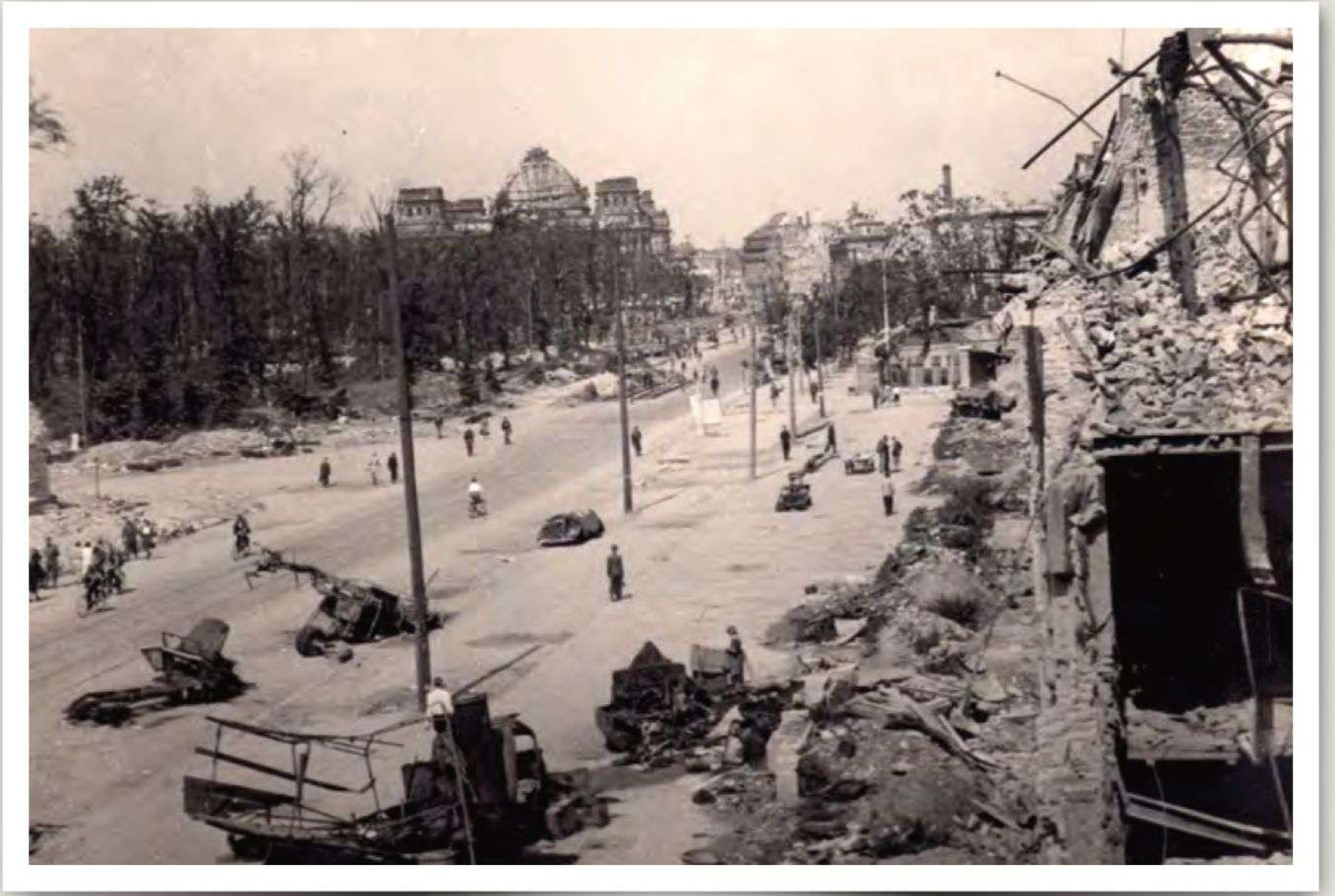
Stalin wanted to capture Berlin before May 1, the International Labour Day, traditionally an important day in the Soviet calendar, and by the last day of April, his troops were in position to attack the Reichstag, which Stalin had given his troops as their final objective. Vassili Subbotin was a Soviet war correspondent. The battalion he was with had occupied the Reichsministerium des Innern (the Reich Ministry of the Interior) on Dorotheenstraße, Looking through the windows of the building, the battalion's CO, a man called Neustroyev, tried to identify the Reichstag through the early morning fog that had risen from the River Spree.

"Neustroyev saw a square, squat building behind the trees," recalled Subbotin. "It did not seem to him to be very big. Indeed, it had a dome and turrets, but did not appear to be anything special… The soldiers pressing towards it were convinced. The Reichstag must be here somewhere, but where?… The Tiergarten lay desolate over there. It was still. They looked at a square that had been torn up by trenches. They saw tanks deep in the park, self-propelled guns and also advertising pillars. There was a river there. Or was it a canal? The building with the dome and turrets looked more imposing from here."[12]

Astonishingly, the Soviet troops were uncertain which building they were supposed to raise the Red Flag on. Eventually, seeing two imposing buildings, the divisional commander ordered flags to be placed on both of them. In fact, a Soviet flag was placed on the roof of the Reichstag at 22.40 hours on April 30, only to be pulled down by the Germans the following morning as they continued to hold out in the ruins.

Russian troops pose for the camera in front of the badly damaged Reichstag late in May 1945. (Shutterstock)

It was on April 30 that Weidling told Hitler his men would probably run out of ammunition during the coming night. Having already accepted that all was lost, the Führer gave permission for the remaining troops to try and break out through the Soviet lines. The defenders held out until the next day and then, on the night of May 1-2 they made their bid for freedom. Only a handful escaped. The next morning, the Red Army seized the Reich Chancellery and at 06.00 hours on May 2, Weidling surrendered.



The scene of some of the last fighting in Berlin – evidence of which still littered the street when this image was taken by a British soldier at the beginning of July 1945. This is a view of the Reichstag as seen looking east from the Tiergarten. (James Luto Collection)

‘WE WERE A CITY IN RUINS’

There are no precise figures for the number of people, military and civilian, who died in those final two weeks of the Soviet offensive, but it is certain that at least 150,000 perished, Soviet and German, and many more were wounded. Perhaps the most shocking statistic of all, and one which demonstrates more than any other just how terrible the situation truly was in Berlin during those last few days, is that of known suicides. A total of 3,881 people of all ages killed themselves. A large percentage of those were women.

Dorothea von Schwanenfluegel recalled the day the Battle of Berlin came to an end: “There was no radio or newspaper, so vans with loudspeakers drove through the streets ordering us to cease all resistance. Suddenly, the shooting and bombing stopped, and the unreal silence meant that one ordeal was over for us and another was about to begin. Our nightmare had become a reality.

“The entire 300 square miles of what was left of Berlin were now completely under control of the Red Army. The last days of savage house to house fighting and street battles had been a human slaughter, with no prisoners being taken on either side. These final days were hell. Our last remaining and exhausted troops, primarily children and old men, stumbled into imprisonment. We were a city in ruins.”[13]

This was echoed by Vasily Grossman, another Soviet war reporter: “2 May. The Day of Berlin’s capitulation. It’s difficult to describe it. A monstrous concentration of impressions. Fire and fires, smoke, smoke, smoke. Enormous crowds of prisoners. Their faces are full of drama. In many faces there’s sadness, not only personal suffering, but also suffering of a citizen. This overcast, cold and rainy day is undoubtedly the day of Germany’s ruin.”[14]

Berlin had fallen at last, but the big question was what had become of the Führer?

Russian troops raise the Soviet flag on the top of the ruined Reichstag building, May 2, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

NOTES:

1. Erich Kempa, *I was Hitler’s Chauffeur* (Frontline, Barnsley, 2012), p.58.
2. Georgi Zhukov, *Marshal Zhukov’s Greatest Battles* (Macdonald, London, 1969), p.286.
3. Bessonov, p.198.
4. Helmut Altner, *Berlin Soldier: An Eyewitness Account of the Fall of Berlin* (Tempus, Stroud, 2007), pp.98-9.
5. Quoted in Tony Le Tissier, *The Battle of Berlin 1945* (History Press, Stroud, 1987), p.72.
6. Jon E. Lewis, *World War II, The Autobiography* (Constable & Robinson, London, 2009), pp.508-9.
7. Tilman Remme, ‘The Battle for Berlin in World War Two’, www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/berlin.
8. James Lucas, *Hitler’s Commanders: German Bravery in the Field, 1939-1945* (Cassell, London, 2000), p.199.
9. Dorothea von Schwanenfluegel Lawson, *Laughter Wasn’t Rationed* (Tricor, Medford, 1999), pp.346-7.
10. Taylor, p.323.
11. Lewis, pp.504-5.
12. Vassili J. Subbotin, *We Stormed the Reichstag, A War Correspondent Remembers* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2017), pp.21-2.
13. Schwanenfluegel Lawson, p.359.
14. Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War, With the Red Army 1941-1945* (Harvill Press, London, 2005), p.338.

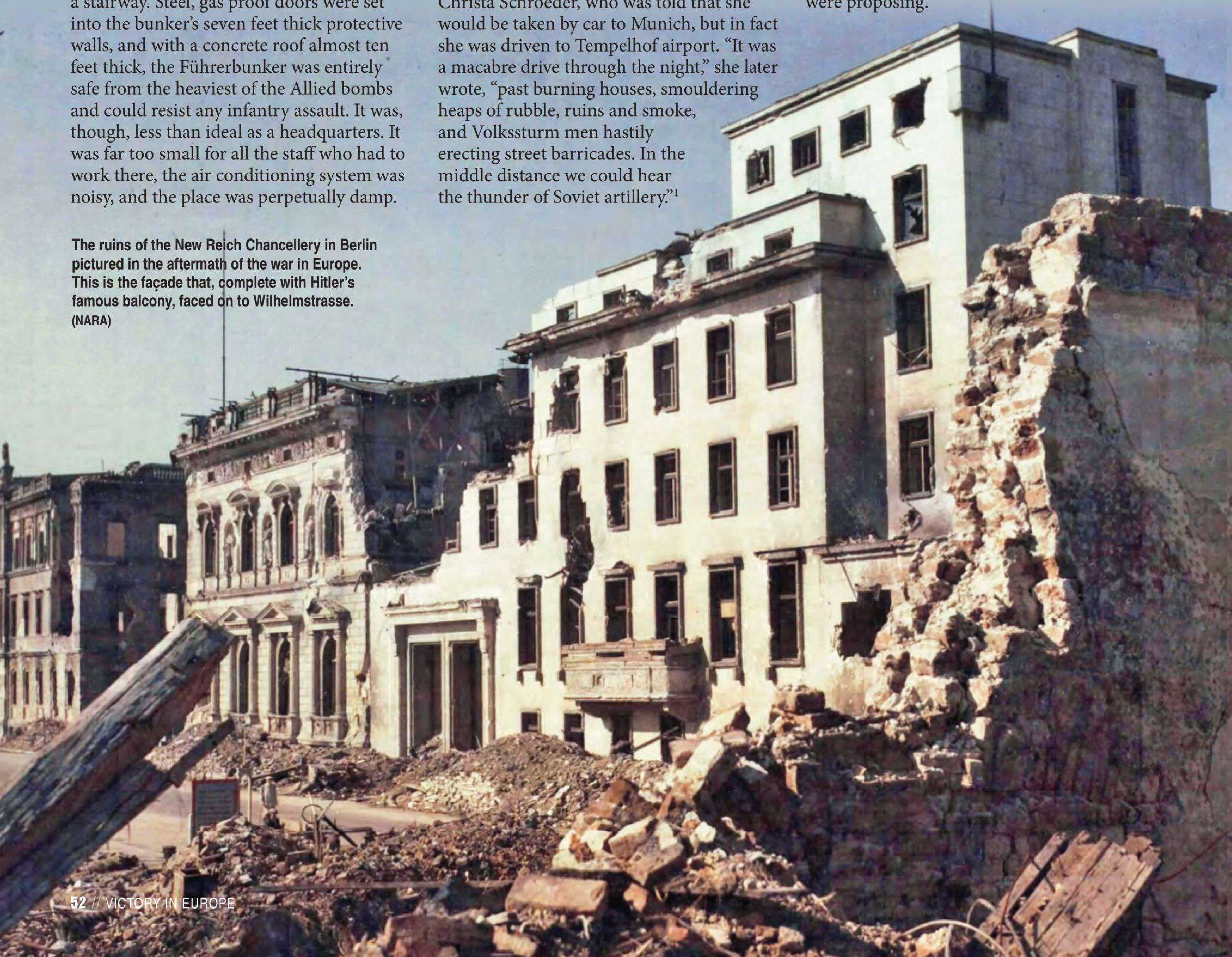
FINAL DAYS IN THE FÜHRERBUNKER

The end of the Third Reich was imminent, just as it was for those who remained in the bunker with Hitler.

Because of the incessant Allied bombing of Berlin, Hitler had moved his headquarters to the bunker beneath the Old Reich Chancellery gardens in March 1945. Built between 1942 and 1943, the bunker was set 28 feet beneath the Old Chancellery Garden, 131 yards north of the New Chancellery. It sat adjacent to, but lower down, than an earlier bunker, the Vorbunker, the two being connected by a stairway. Steel, gas proof doors were set into the bunker's seven feet thick protective walls, and with a concrete roof almost ten feet thick, the Führerbunker was entirely safe from the heaviest of the Allied bombs and could resist any infantry assault. It was, though, less than ideal as a headquarters. It was far too small for all the staff who had to work there, the air conditioning system was noisy, and the place was perpetually damp. Nevertheless, Hitler had his own sitting room, bedroom and study. Eva Braun had a separate bedroom.

The atmosphere in the bunker had become increasingly bleak as the Soviets moved ever closer to the centre of Berlin. On the day of his 56th birthday, April 20, Hitler instructed some of his closest companions to leave the city while they still could. This included one of his secretaries, Christa Schroeder, who was told that she would be taken by car to Munich, but in fact she was driven to Tempelhof airport. "It was a macabre drive through the night," she later wrote, "past burning houses, smouldering heaps of rubble, ruins and smoke, and Volkssturm men hastily erecting street barricades. In the middle distance we could hear the thunder of Soviet artillery."[1]

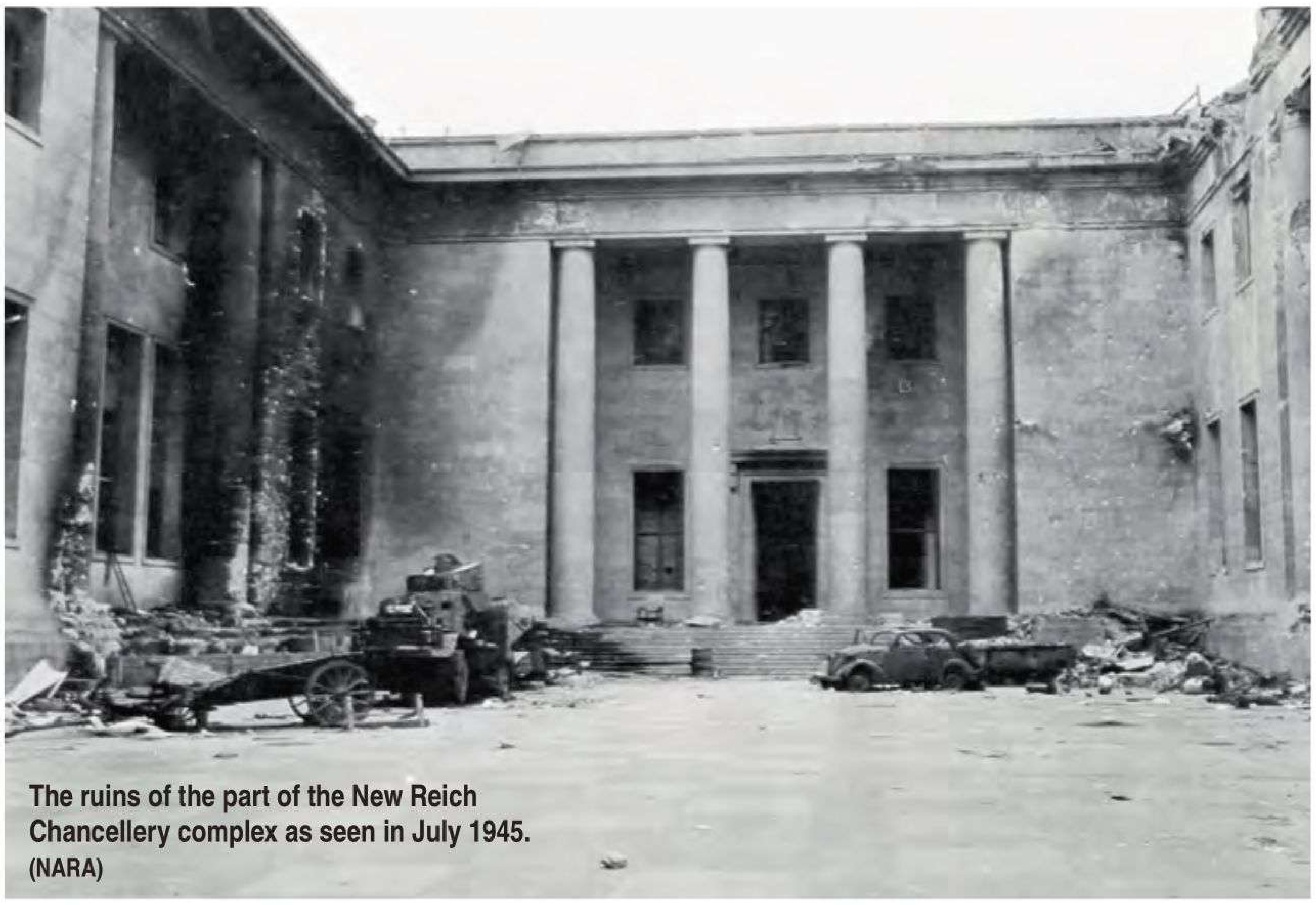
Everyone in the bunker tried to persuade Hitler to leave Berlin – except one man, and it might have been his words which had the most effect. That man was Hitler's friend and Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer. On April 23, Speer arrived at the bunker for his final meeting with the Führer. During their conversation, Hitler turned to Speer and asked if he should remain in Berlin or fly down to Berchtesgaden as others were proposing.



The ruins of the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin pictured in the aftermath of the war in Europe. This is the façade that, complete with Hitler's famous balcony, faced on to Wilhelmstrasse. (NARA)

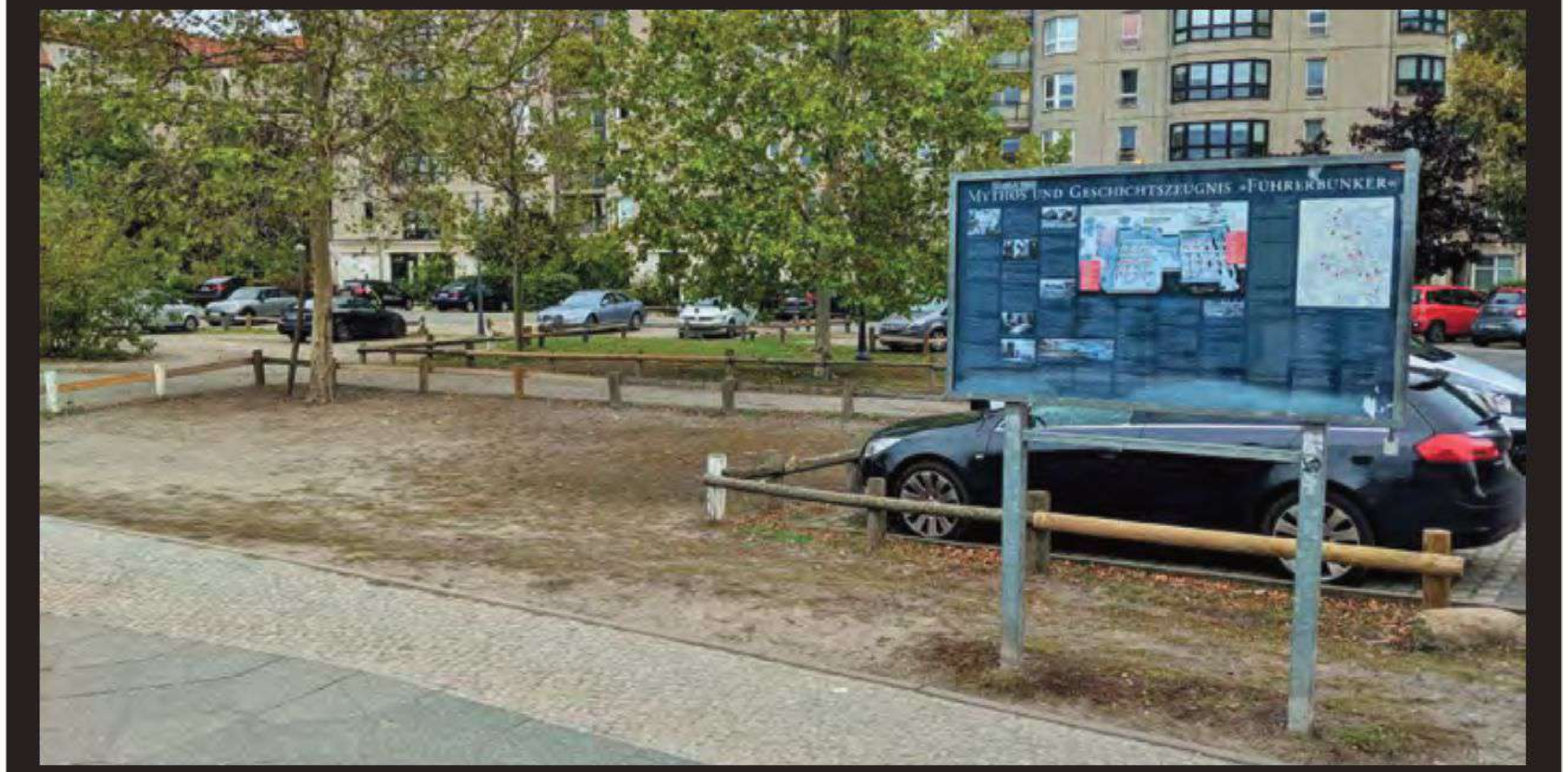
“Spontaneously, I advised him to stay in Berlin,” Speer later wrote in his memoirs. “What would he do at Obersalzberg? With Berlin gone, the war would be over in any case… It seems to me better, if it must be, that you end your life here in the capital as the Führer rather than your weekend house.”

To this advice, Hitler replied, “I too have resolved to stay here. I only wanted to hear your view.” Hitler then told Speer of his plans. “I’ve given orders that I am to be cremated. Fraulein Braun wants to depart this life with me, and I’ll shoot Blondi beforehand. Believe me, Speer, it is easy for me to end my life. A brief moment and I’m freed of everything, liberated from this painful existence.”[2]


The ruins of the part of the New Reich Chancellery complex as seen in July 1945. (NARA)

Along with the effects of Hitler’s outburst on April 22, the mood in Hitler’s inner circle deepened further. Word of the Führer’s apparent mental collapse and his decision to kill himself spread rapidly throughout the Nazi leadership. Reichsmarschall Herman Goering, who was Hitler’s appointed successor, saw this as an opportunity for him to take over the reins of power. He therefore sent the following telegram message to Hitler on the afternoon of April 23: “My Führer! In view of your decision to remain in the fortress of Berlin, do you agree that I take over at once the total leadership of the Reich, with full freedom of action at home and abroad as your deputy, in accordance with your decree of June 29, 1941? If no reply is received by 10 o’clock tonight, I shall take it for granted that you have lost your freedom of action and shall consider the conditions of your decree as fulfilled and shall act for the best interests of our country and our people. You know what I feel for you in this gravest hour of my life. Words fail me to express myself. May God protect you, and speed you quickly here in spite of all.”

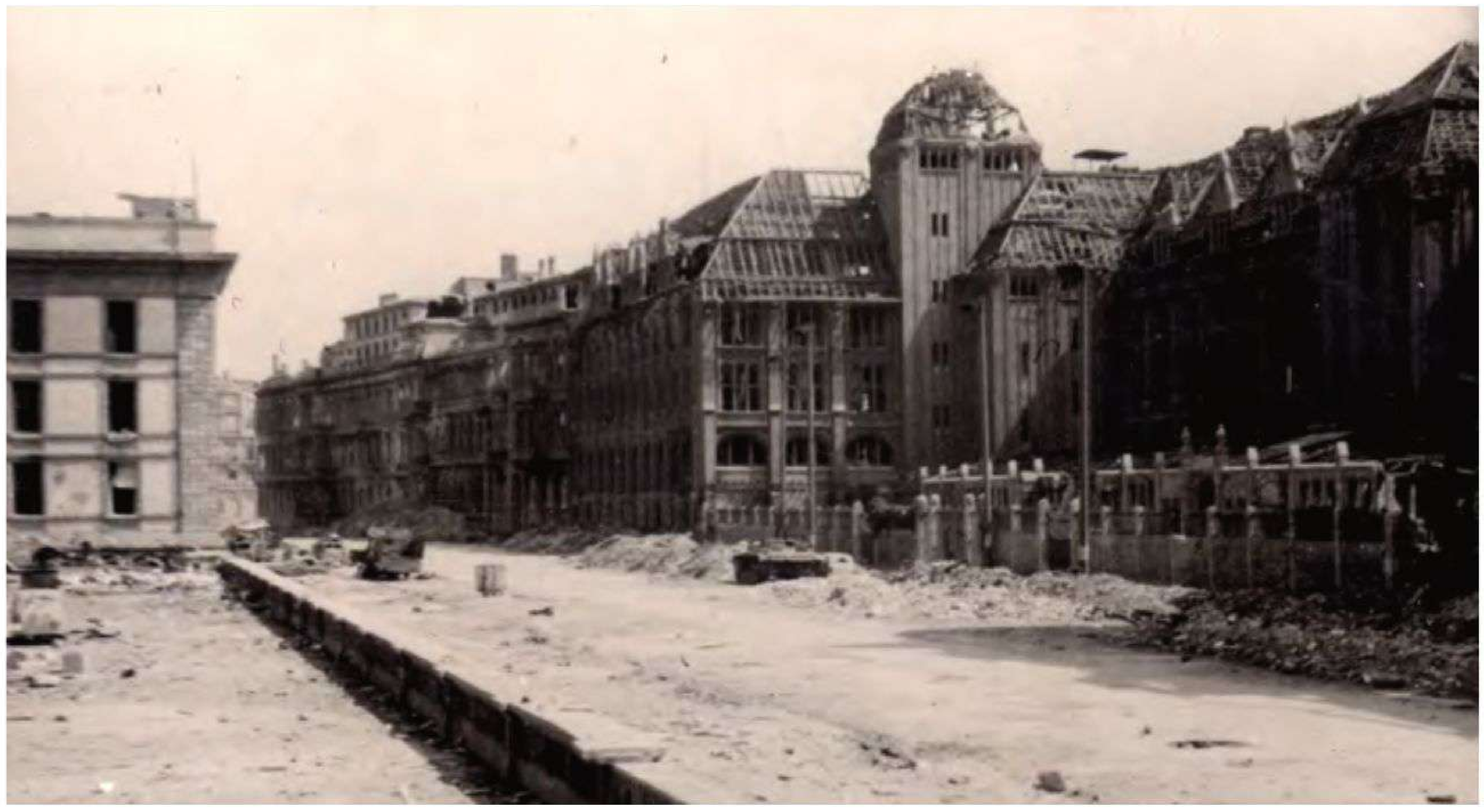
THE SITE OF THE FÜHRERBUNKER



The Führerbunker was located beneath what is today land adjacent to a residential road known as Gertrud-Kolmar-Strasse, which, in turn, runs north off Voss Strasse. The main entrance to the New Reich Chancellery opened out into Voss Strasse. This image shows the information panel that can be seen at the site, by the junction of In den Ministergärten and Gertrud-Kolmar-Strasse. The block of flats in the background are roughly on the area where the Old Reich Chancellery was located. The photographer is standing in what would have been the Reich Chancellery garden. (Historic Military Press)

When he read this message from Goering, Hitler was furious. He expected all the German leaders to die just as he was determined to do, and he saw in Goering’s words the obvious desire to continue living. Hitler, urged by Martin Bormann, the Head of the Chancellery, denounced Goering as a traitor and he was stripped of all his titles and privileges. Hitler was determined that there could be no accusations of Germany’s leaders looking to their own survival, as had been the case at the end of the First World War.

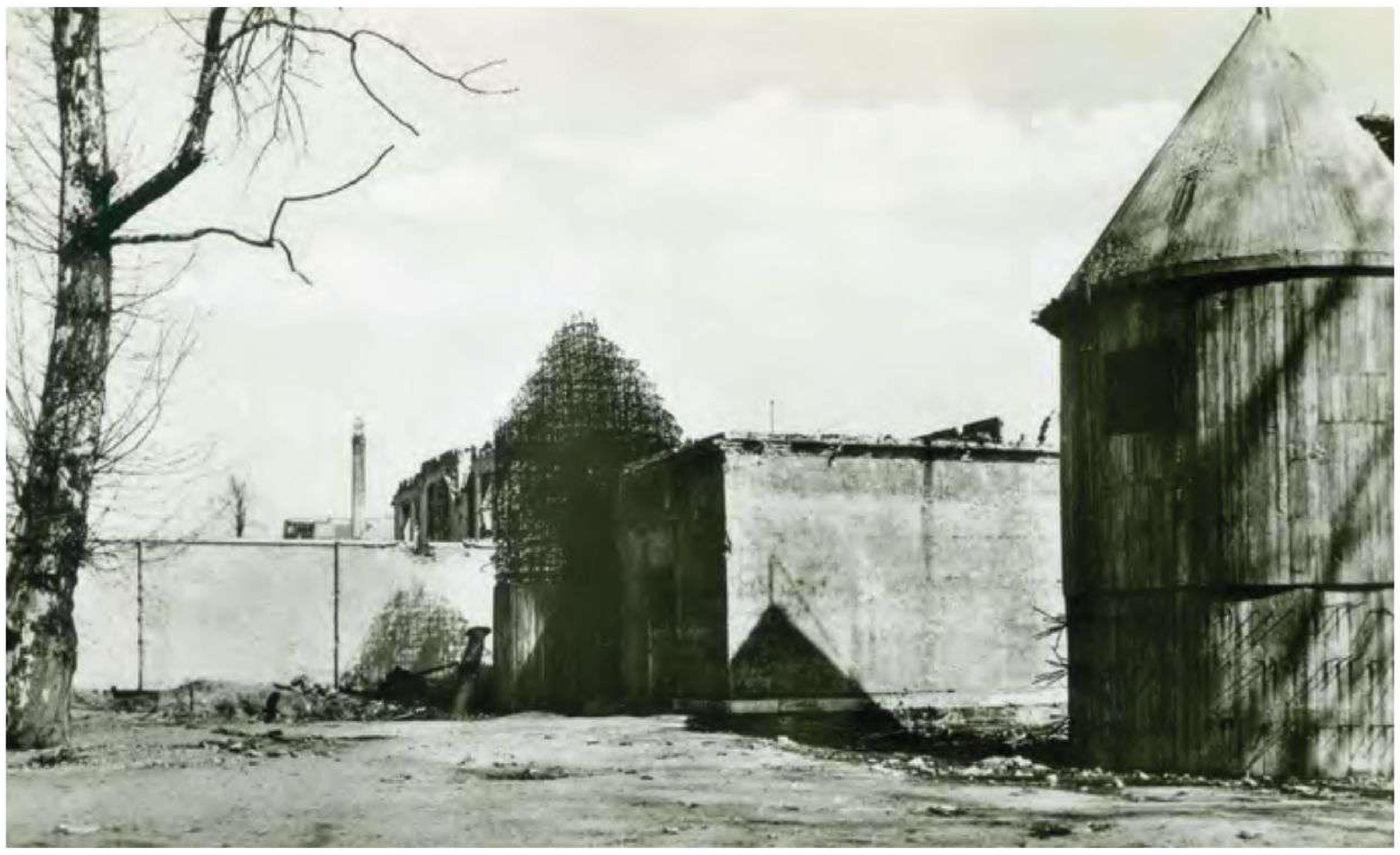
Even worse news was to follow on April 28. A BBC radio broadcast was picked up by Goebbels which announced that Himmler was attempting to negotiate surrender terms with the Americans. Hitler ‘raged like a madman’ with unprecedented fury when he was informed of Himmler’s betrayal. Himmler, wisely, was in Lübeck and out of reach. However, his personal liaison officer, SS-Gruppenführer Hermann Fegelein, was in the bunker, having earlier been caught trying to escape from Berlin in civilian clothes. So, as Himmler could


On July 2, 1945, advance troops of the British 7th Armoured Division entered the ruined city of Berlin. Lieutenant Frank Barnes of the 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment was one of those soldiers. This is one of a series of images that Barnes took over the following days. It shows the forecourt in front of the main entrance to the New Reich Chancellery, on Voss Strasse, soon after Frank reached Berlin. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

The bunker complex consisted of two separate shelters, the Vorbunker (the 'forward', or upper, bunker), which was completed in 1936, and the Führerbunker, located 2.5 metres lower than the Vorbunker and to the west-southwest, which was completed in 1944. The two bunkers were connected by a stairway set at right angles and could be closed off from each other by a bulkhead and steel door. The farthest end of this area of grass is roughly above where the staircase between the Vorbunker (to the right) and the Führerbunker (to the left) was located below ground. The Old Reich Chancellery was located out of view to the right. (Historic Military Press)

not be found, Hitler ordered that Fegelein be interrogated and put before a court martial. Though the exact course of events that followed are disputed, later in the day Fegelein was taken up to the Chancellery garden where he was executed.

Speer, not being a military man, was encouraged by Hitler to leave the bunker while there was still a possibility of getting away. He did not tarry: "Ten minutes later, with hardly another word spoken to anyone, I left the Chancellor's residence… There was almost a ghostly quiet about everything, like a night in the mountains. The noise of the great city, which in earlier years had penetrated to here even during the night, had totally ceased. At rather long intervals I heard the detonations of Russian shells. Such was my last visit to the Chancellery. Years ago, I had built it – full of plans, prospects, and dreams for the future. Now I was leaving the ruins of my building, and the most significant years of my life."[3]



A view of the rear entrance to the Führerbunker in the garden of the Reich Chancellery taken in 1946 or early 1947. The cone-shaped structure on the right was part of the ventilation system, though it also served as a shelter for the guards. The square part of the building just beyond it was an emergency exit to the garden from the shelter/bunker below ground, whilst the other structure just beyond the exit is a second ventilation/guard tower (which was still under construction), with the garden wall beyond. The rear of the Reich Chancellery itself is out of view to the right. (Historic Military Press)

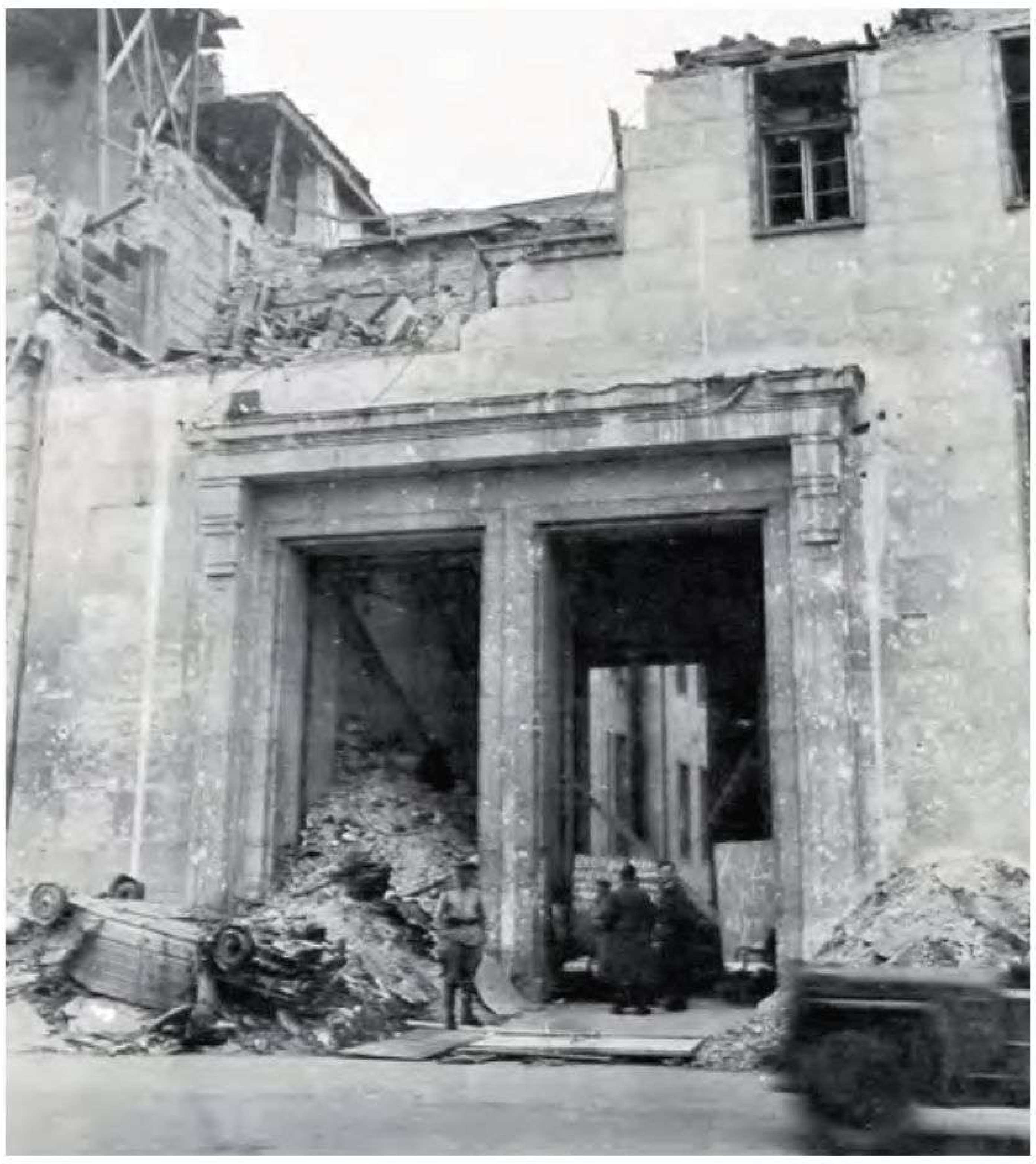
Another view of the area of the Führerbunker. The block of flats on the right is roughly on the area where the Old Reich Chancellery stood. The round ventilation/guard tower was located approximately in the spot where the dark blue BMW is parked on the left foreground. The exit from the Führerbunker was a little to the left. (Historic Military Press)

'A SHADOWY LIFE'

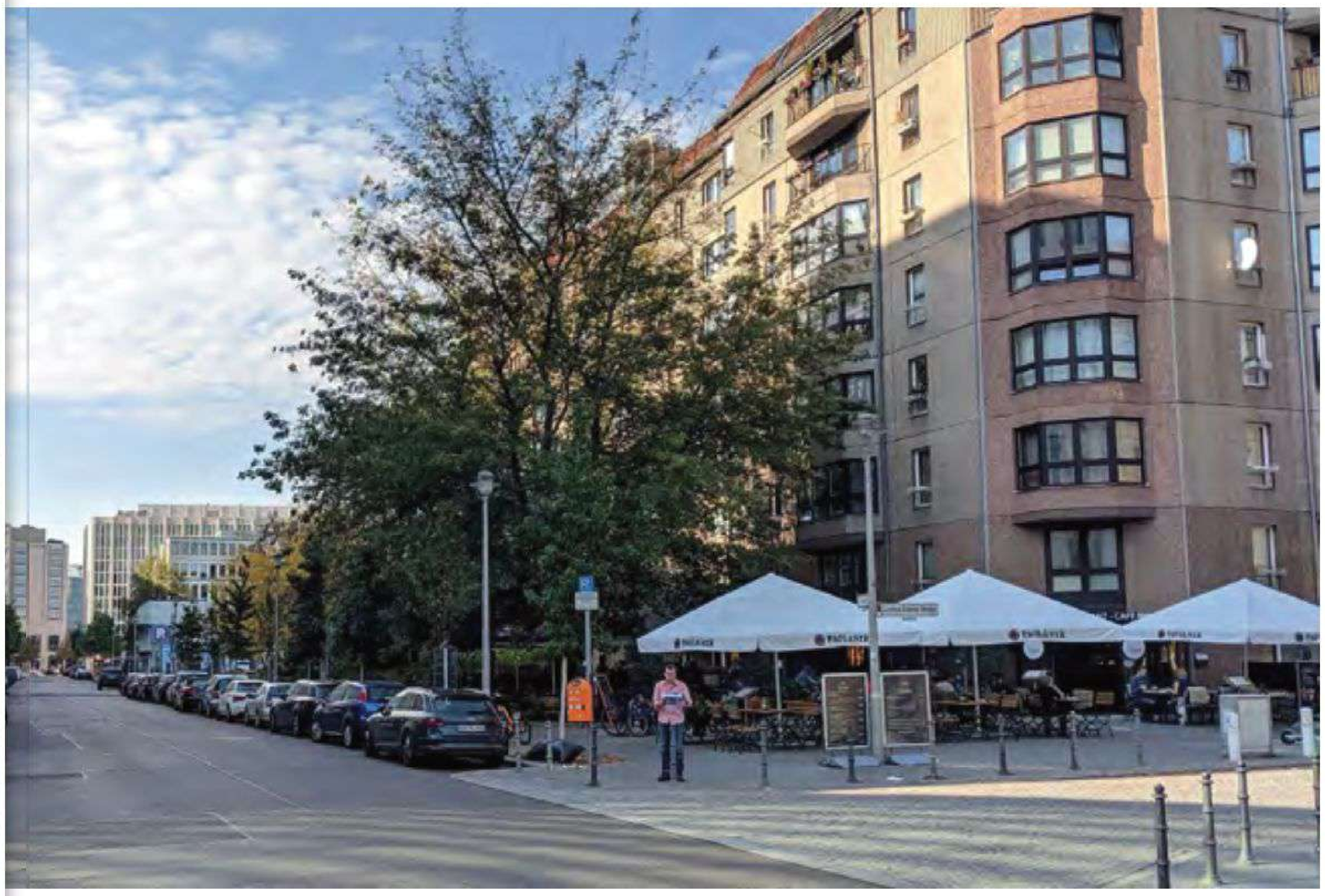
Meanwhile, on the night of April 26-27, the first heavy Soviet barrage bracketed the Chancellery. According to Hanna Reitsch, the record-breaking female test pilot who was in the bunker, the splintering of heavy shells and the crashing of falling buildings directly above the bunker tightened the nervous strain of everyone and the sound of deep sobbing could be heard through some of the doors. The falling masonry seemed to symbolise the collapse of the regime to which those in the bunker had pledged their allegiance and which had given them so much.

While most of those in the bunker were able to control their feelings, on April 28 General der Infanterie Wilhelm Burgdorf snapped and told Martin Bormann just what he thought, and in doing so probably echoed the sentiments of so many Germans: "Our young officers went into battle full of faith and idealism. They went to their death by the hundred thousand. But for what? For their Fatherland, for Germany's greatness and future? For a decent life? In their hearts they did, but nowhere else. They died for you, for your pockets, for your boundless ambitions. Thinking they were dying for a just cause, our youth allowed themselves to be bled to death on the battlefields of Europe, sacrificing millions of innocent lives, while you, the Party leaders, waxed richer and richer, living it up like lords, accumulating untold riches, stealing vast estates, building castles, revelling in luxury, deceiving and milking the nation. Our ideals, our morals, our faith, our soul - all these you have ground into dirt; mankind was only a stepping-stone for your insatiable greed. You have destroyed our ancient culture; you have broken up our nation. That is your only achievement!"[4]

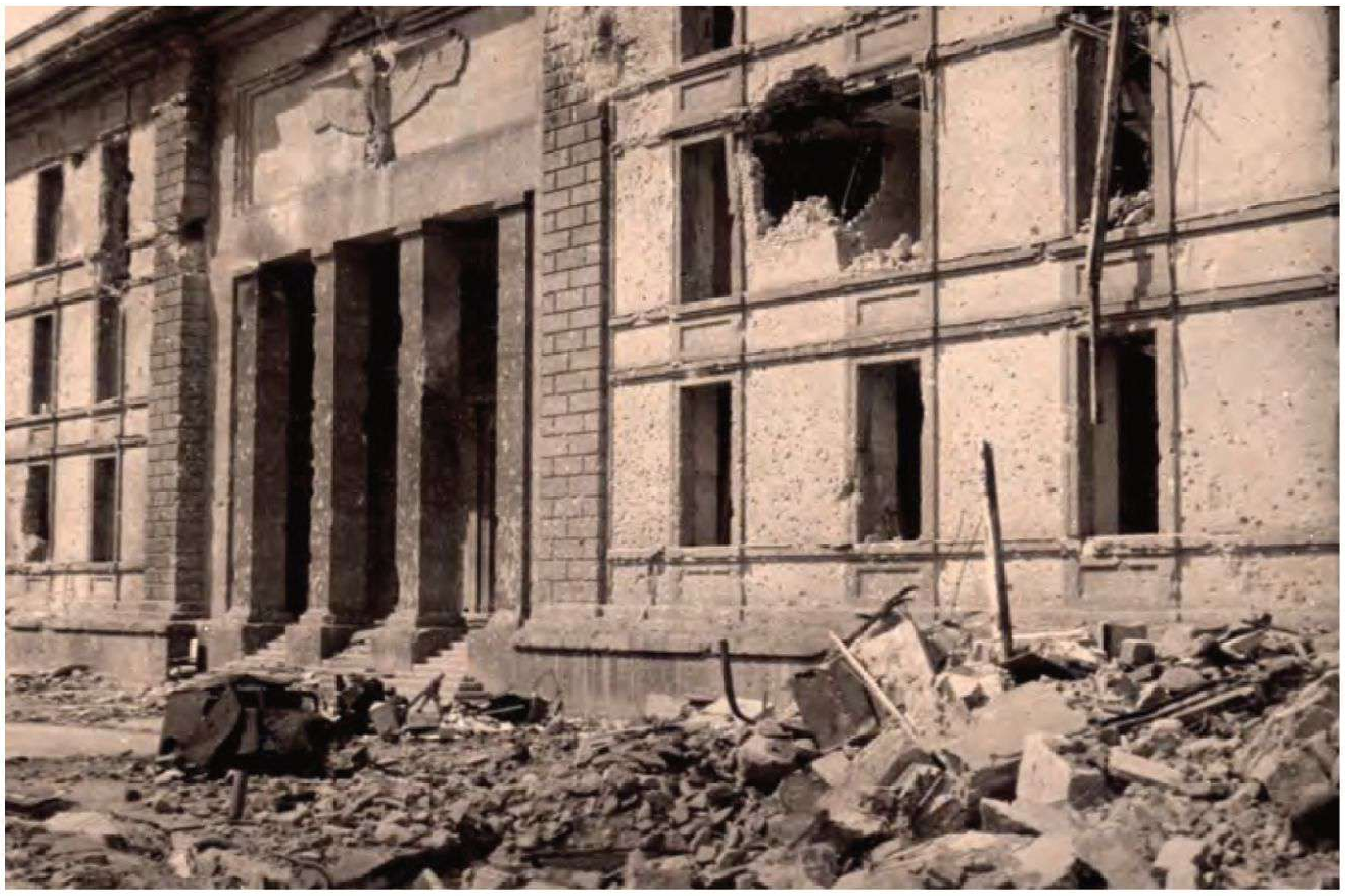
Burgdorf, though, as had many others who remained in the bunker, reconciled himself to sharing Hitler's fate. If the Führer was going to stay in the bunker and kill himself then so would they. This was vocalised by Goebbels, who declared: "We shall go down for the glory of the Reich so that the name of Germany will live forever." His wife, Magda, was determined to end everything along with the Führer. According to Hanna Reitsch, Frau Goebbels often thanked God that she was alive so that she could kill her children to save them from whatever 'evil' would follow the end of the Reich. To Reitsch, she said: "My dear Hanna, when the end comes you must help me if I become weak about the children. You must help me to help them out of this life. They belong to the Third Reich and to the Führer and if those two things cease to exist there can be no further place for them."[5] The Goebbels had six children.



The ruins of the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin, more specifically one of the entrances, as seen in July 1945. (NARA)



Looking west down Voss Strasse in Berlin today. The road on the right in the foreground is Gertrud-Kolmar-Strasse, which runs north off Voss Strasse over the area where the Führerbunker was located. The area on the right side of Voss Strasse, where the trees can be seen, was roughly where the forecourt of the New Reich Chancellery was located, and the Chancellery's main entrance. (Historic Military Press)



Lieutenant Frank Barnes took this image of the main entrance to the New Reich Chancellery, on Voss Strasse, soon after he arrived in Berlin. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

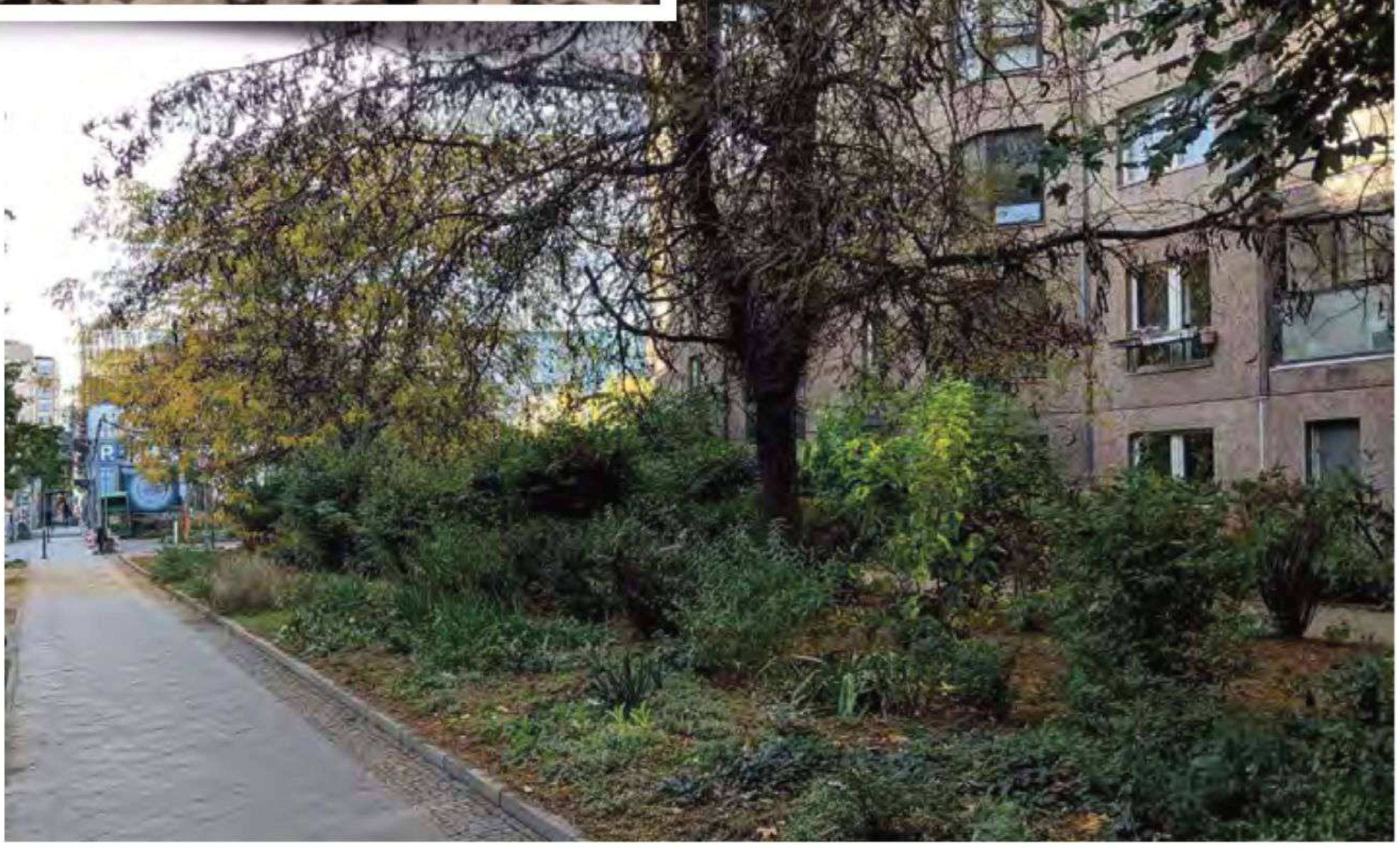
As well as the Goebbels children in the bunker, Hitler had his Alsatian dog Blondi to keep him company. Hitler had mated Blondi and the bitch had produced a litter, all of which had been given away apart from a male, which Hitler had kept and was given the name 'Wulf'. Blondi was allowed to sleep with Hitler in bed (much to Eva's disapproval) and he was often seen with the puppy Wulf on his lap, stroking it affectionally.

Another of Hitler's secretaries, Traudl Junge, had reconciled herself to her imminent death and seemingly just wanted to get the whole agonising episode over with. "The Führer is still leading a shadowy life in the bunker. He wanders restlessly around the rooms. Sometimes I wonder what he is waiting for, why he doesn't finally put an end to it all, because there's nothing to be saved now."

Junge plucked up the courage to suggest to Hitler that the German people would expect him to fall in battle at the head of his troops. "I'm no longer in any physical shape to fight," he replied. "My trembling hands can hardly hold a pistol. If I am wounded, I won't find any of my men to shoot me. And I don't want to fall into the hands of the Russians."[6]

HITLER WAS A WRECK

Though seemingly resigned to defeat and death, Hitler still hoped that there might be salvation if Wenck's 12th Army could fall on the Soviets. Wenck, as we know, was determined to surrender to the Americans and had no intention of marching to Berlin. Hitler had no way of knowing this and



Taken from the pavement on the north side of Voss Strasse in Berlin, looking east, this picture shows the general area where the forecourt of the New Reich Chancellery was located, as was the Chancellery's main entrance. (Historic Military Press)

A battle-scarred eagle and swastika that was made for the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. With a wingspan of 113 inches and cast in four sections (the body, wings and plinth), this eagle was sculpted by Schmid-Ehmen. It is one of two incorporated into the Reich Chancellery and was taken from the partially ruined building at the end of the war. (Historic Military Press)

> **"Thinking they were dying for a just cause, our youth allowed themselves to be bled to death on the battlefields of Europe."**

he grasped at this last possibility. Taking advantage of this, two staff officers, Bernard von Loringhoven and Gerhard Boldt, saw a means of escaping from the bunker. They suggested that if they were able to get through to Wenck they would be able to give the general an up-to-date assessment of the situation in Berlin and could "guide him on the best route for his attack". Hitler, and even Bormann, agreed to this plan.

On April 29, the two officers, along with Oberstleutnant Rudolf Weiss, left the bunker. Von Loringhoven wrote of his last meeting with Hitler before his escape: "I personally got the impression that he was a bit envious. We were 29 or 30 years old and we had a chance to get out because we were sound and young, and he had no chance because he was a wreck."

It was also on April 29 that news reached the bunker of the execution of Mussolini and his mistress, Claretta Petacci, by Italian partisans, and the public display of their bodies which were defiled and abused. Hitler was determined that neither he nor Eva Braun should suffer such desecration and further hardened his resolve to kill himself and that Eva should share that fate with him. Eva had already decided on the manner in which she would die and had written her farewell letters to friends and family. That afternoon Hitler went from room to room shaking hands with all but his immediate staff, saying a few words of encouragement and thanks to each. Hitler's bodyguards were instructed to destroy all his confidential papers.

Earlier, shortly after midnight on the night of April 28-29, Hitler and Eva Braun were married in a small civil ceremony within the Führerbunker, where the conference room had been turned into a registry office. The event was witnessed by Joseph Goebbels and Martin Bormann. Thereafter, Hitler hosted a modest wedding breakfast with his new wife, Frau Hitler, who, having had her hair made up by her maid, wore a long black taffeta dress with her favourite diamond watch, gold bracelet and topaz necklace. Eva had finally married the man she had loved since she was 17 years old. They would have just one more day together.

The ruins of von Ribbentrop's Foreign Ministry pictured a short distance from the Reich Chancellery in the partially cleared Wilhelmstrasse, soon after the German surrender in May 1945. (NARA)

NOTES:

1. Christa Schroeder, *He was my Chief, The Memoires of Adolf Hitler's Secretary* (Frontline, Barnsley, 2012), p.179.
2. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (Phoenix, London, 1995), pp.639-40.
3. ibid, pp.647-8.
4. Hans Dollinge, *The Decline and Fall of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan*, Library of Congress Catalogue Card, No.67-27047, p.237.
5. Confidential interview to the United States Air Forces in Austria, 8 October 1945.
6. Traudl Junge, op cit, p.178.

'HITLER IS DEAD!'

On the evening of May 1, 1945, an announcement on the BBC told the world the news that many had waited so long to hear.

On the evening of April 28, 1945, Hitler asked his secretary, Traudl Junge, to accompany him to the conference room in the Führerbunker, and to take with her a shorthand pad. She sat down to wait for Hitler's words, wondering, with Germany on the brink of defeat, what there could possibly be to write about. "For several seconds," she later recorded, "if the concrete didn't act like a drumskin, mercilessly amplifying the reverberations of every bomb blast and every shot, you could have heard only the breathing of two human beings. Then, suddenly, the Führer utters the first words 'My political statement'."[1]

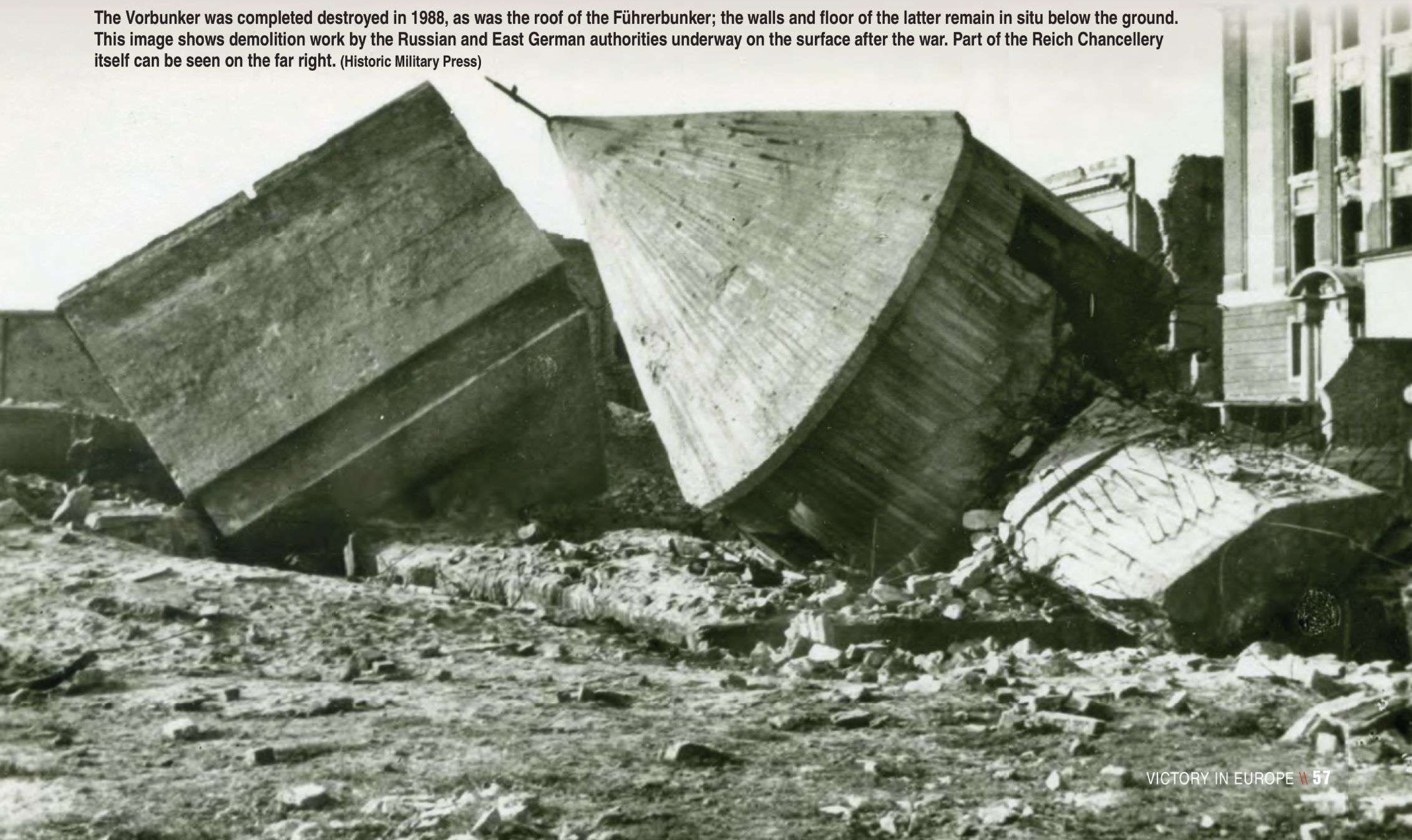
Working throughout the night, Junge typed up Hitler's last will and testament. Finally, at 04.00 hours on April 29, Adolf Hitler signed the last page in the history of the Third Reich.

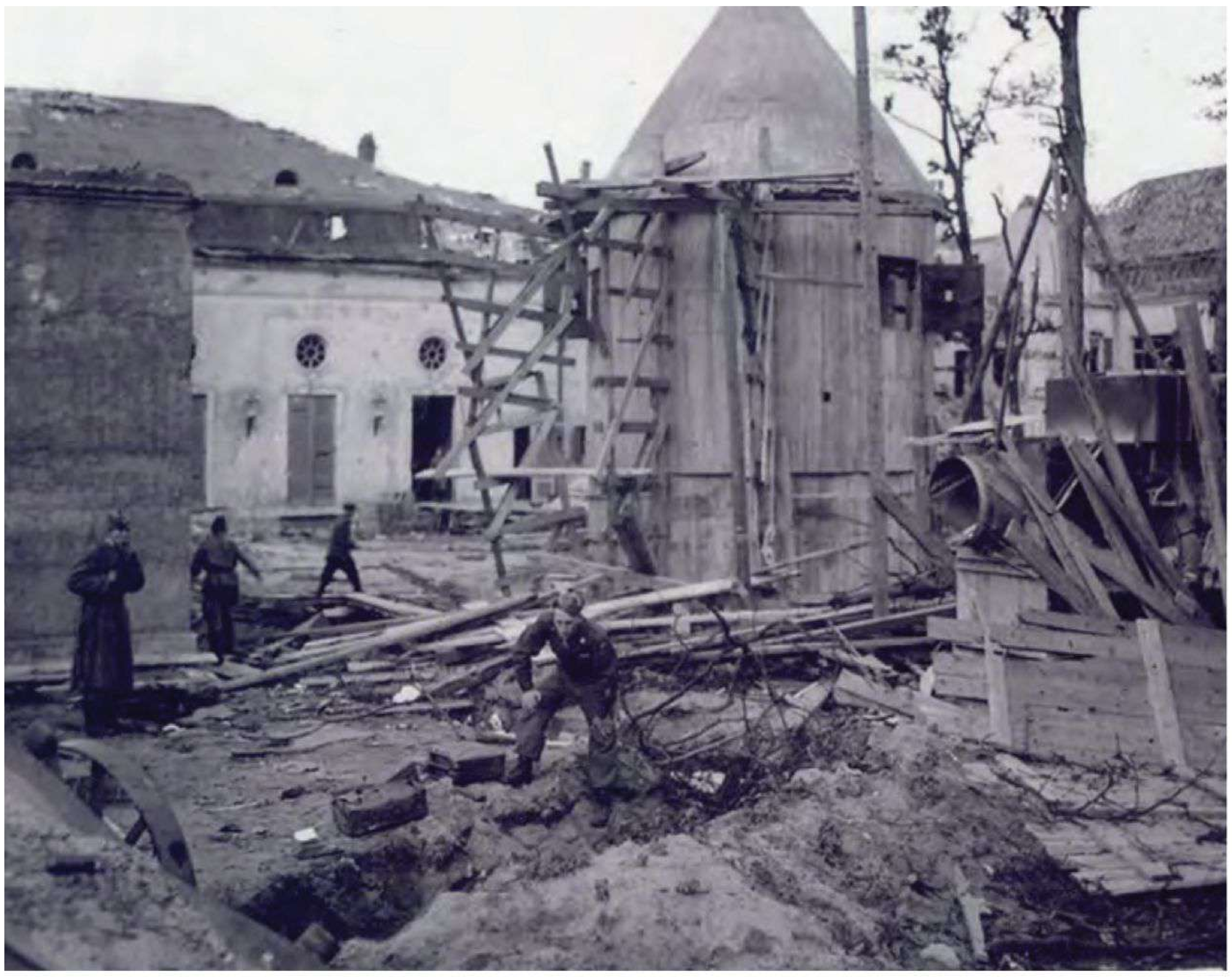
In his will, which included a political testament given in two parts, Hitler declared his intention to commit suicide: "I, myself and my wife – in order to escape the disgrace of deposition or capitulation – choose death. It is our wish to be burnt immediately on the spot where I have carried out the greatest part of my daily work in the course of twelve years' service to my people."

That same morning, between 09.00 hours and 10.00 hours, Hauptschriftführer Heinz Lorenz, whose job was to take down news received from foreign broadcasts and pass them directly onto Hitler's staff, was summoned by Martin Bormann, who then handed him Hitler's will and testament, as well as a declaration by Goebbels. Lorenz was instructed to leave Berlin at once in civilian clothes and take the documents to Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz, who had been named as Hitler's successor. If that proved impossible, he was to find a means of publishing the will and testament for posterity.

Two further copies were made of the documents and later that day Lorenz, Major Willy Johannmeyer, who was Hitler's adjutant, and SS-Standartenführer Wilhelm Zander, Bormann's adjutant, left the bunker. Along with the copy of the will that Lorenz was to take to Dönitz, who was at Flensburg near the Danish border, Zander and Johannmeyer were to also take copies to Generalfeldmarschall Ferdinand Schörner, commander of Army Group Centre, then fighting in Czechoslovakia, and Gauleiter Paul Giesler, the newly-appointed Reich Minister for the Interior, who was in Tegernsee in Bavaria.

The Vorbunker was completed destroyed in 1988, as was the roof of the Führerbunker; the walls and floor of the latter remain in situ below the ground. This image shows demolition work by the Russian and East German authorities underway on the surface after the war. Part of the Reich Chancellery itself can be seen on the far right. (Historic Military Press)





Soviet and US personnel pictured near the rear entrance to the Führerbunker, in the garden of the Reich Chancellery, soon after its capture and before demolition was undertaken by the Russian and East German authorities. As mentioned before, the cone-shaped structure on the right was part of the ventilation system. The square building to the left was an emergency exit to the garden from shelter/bunker below ground. (NARA)

The trio made their way to an island in the River Havel called the Pfaueninsel. There they were to be picked up by an aircraft – a Fieseler Fi 156 Storch flown by Oberstleutnant Grassmann – which would take them to their respective destinations. Whilst they waited for the plane to arrive, they sheltered from a heavy bombardment by Soviet artillery, firstly under a canoe and then a small yacht. The pilot, however, was unable to complete the landing and flew off without picking up the intended passengers.

The three men then resolved to make their way to Flensburg, in the north of the German state of Schleswig-Holstein, on foot. But, among the chaos of thousands of displaced persons pouring westwards away from the Soviets, they found it impossible to force their way to the north. So, they dispersed, each carrying their secret documents, unsure of what they should do with Hitler's will and what future awaited them in the immediate post-war world.

CYANIDE

Back in the bunker, the thoughts of those who remained were focussed on the means by which they would end their lives. They all knew that the end was imminent, especially after Generalmajor Wilhelm Mohnke, commanding officer of the Zitadelle, told Hitler on the April 29 that he could only hold out for a further 20 or 24 hours. Some were considering using cyanide in the form of capsules which had been provided by Himmler's SS. But following Himmler's attempts at negotiating a surrender with the Allies, Hitler was highly suspicious of anything connected with the man he now considered a traitor. As he had already decided that his dogs should die, Hitler asked for one of the cyanide tablets to be tried on Blondi. Dr Werner Hasse was asked to administer the poison.

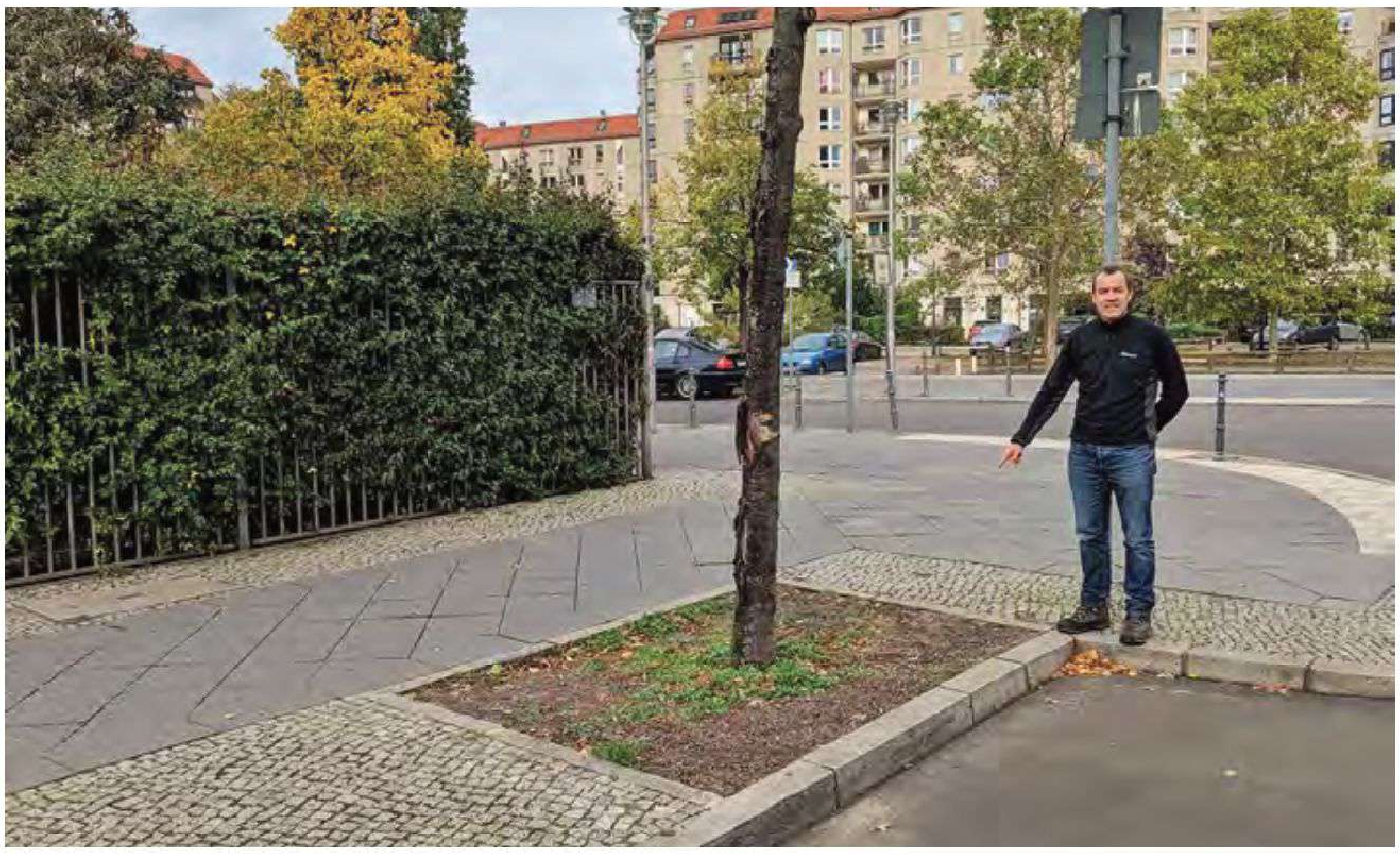
Hitler's bodyguard, Rochus Misch, who was operating the bunker's telephone switchboard, watched the distressing scene which took place in the washroom just a few feet from his post. The doctor thrust a pair of tongs which held one of the capsules inside Blondi's mouth. "There was a cracking sound," remembered Misch, "and Blondi quickly collapsed. Hitler made a few steps forward and observed for a few seconds. Then he turned away silently and returned to his room. There was a smell of bitter almonds."[2] Hitler was devastated with the death of Blondi, and it was apparent to everyone in the bunker that they had only hours left to live or die.

Soon after the German surrender, an American soldier, Pfc Harvey Natchees, stands on the spot where it was reported to the Allies that the bodies of Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun had been cremated. (Historic Military Press)

At around 02.30 hours on April 30, Hitler appeared in the corridor where about 20 people, mostly women, were assembled to give their farewells. He walked the line and shook hands with each of them before retiring to his quarters. "He looked like a shadow. He looked emotionless, and very grey and pale, like a broken old man," remembered Traudl Junge. "His movements were very slow. He was not the dictator anymore, and the impressive, fascinating man he was earlier."

At midday, Hitler attended his last-ever military conference and was told the Russians were barely a block away from the bunker. Two hours later, Hitler sat down for his final meal, a vegetarian lunch, with

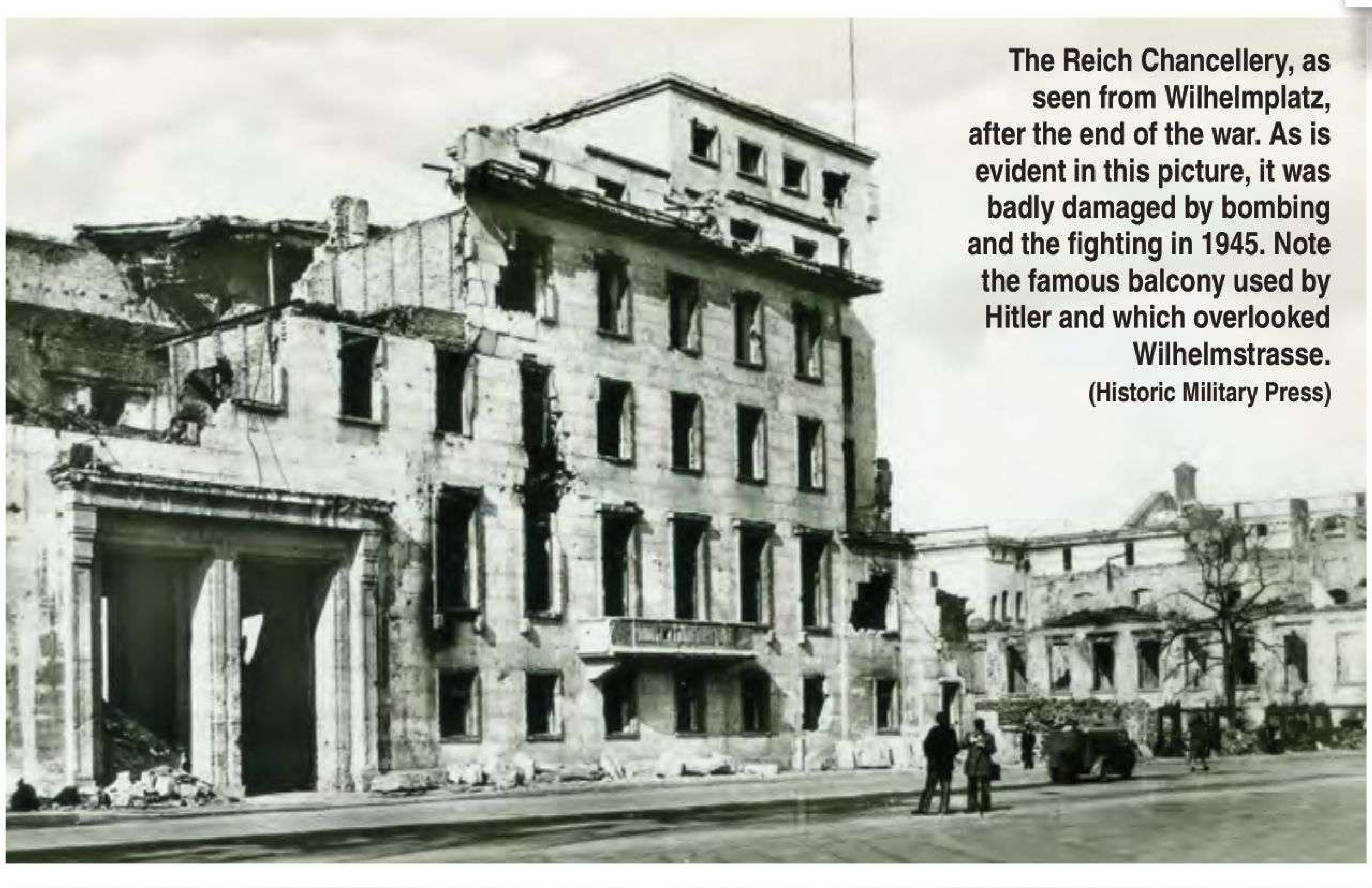
Historian James Luto is pictured standing off Gertrud-Kolmar-Strasse, roughly above where Hitler's rooms would have been in the Führerbunker, some 8.5 metres below ground. (Historic Military Press)



James Luto points at roughly the spot where the bodies of Hitler and Eva Braun were set alight in the garden of the Reich Chancellery. This spot today is on the junction of In den Ministergärten (in which the photographer is standing) and Gertrud-Kolmar-Strasse (in which the car is parked). The dark blue BMW is parked roughly where the round ventilation/guard tower was located. (Historic Military Press)

his cook, Constanze Manziarly, and his two secretaries, Traudl Junge and Gerda Christian. His wife had no appetite and she stayed in her room with her maid, Liesl Ostertag. In the meantime, Hitler's personal adjutant, Flinge Otto Günsche, had spoken with the Führer's chauffeur, Obersturmbannführer Erich Kempka, and ordered him to obtain as much petrol as he could and bring it to the emergency exit of the Führerbunker. Kempka and his men duly delivered some eight to ten army petrol cans, between them containing some 180 to 200 litres of petrol, to the spot requested in the Chancellery garden.

Surprisingly, knowing that the end was at hand, there was a lightening of the mood and a party soon developed in a corridor of the upper bunker, where schnapps flowed liberally. Eva sat at one end of the table, "knocking back the drink and dominating the conversation with chirpy stories". Hitler, though, retired to his room to rest, and the party gradually dispersed.



The Reich Chancellery, as seen from Wilhelmplatz, after the end of the war. As is evident in this picture, it was badly damaged by bombing and the fighting in 1945. Note the famous balcony used by Hitler and which overlooked Wilhelmstrasse. (Historic Military Press)

THE END

At around 14.45 hours, the Hitlers, Adolf and Eva, said their final farewells to their closest staff. Hitler moved only slowly, stooping more than ever; a man broken in both body and spirit. Hitler and Eva shook hands with everyone, before they retired into Hitler's study.

Günshe stood guard outside the room. Others, not knowing what to do, just hung around nearby. A little after 15.30 hours there was the sound of a gunshot. Rochus Misch, still at his post on the switchboard, heard someone calling for Hitler's valet, Heinz Linge, and he went with Linge and Günshe into the study.

"I looked only for a few seconds," Misch later wrote, "but I have never forgotten what I saw. My glance first fell on Eva. She was seated on the sofa with her legs drawn up, her head inclined towards Hitler. Her shoes were under the sofa. Near her – I cannot remember whether on the sofa or the armchair near it – the dead Hitler. His eyes were open and staring, his head had fallen forward slightly. I saw no blood. I shrank back. All I wanted to do now was get away."[3]

Eva had not wanted her head disfigured by a gunshot and had therefore opted to take cyanide. In case the poison did not work, Hitler had taken two pistols into the room. Though Eva did not want to spoil her looks, the cyanide had distorted her face.

Misch started to climb the steps out of the bunker, but something stopped him. He just had to stay; he knew that these were moments of great significance. He returned to the study, to watch the unfolding events. Hitler's valet, Heinz Linge, spread out two blankets and placed the two bodies separately on them. Eva was carried out first by Bormann, assisted by Kempka, and then, with the help of officers from the Führer's SS bodyguard detachment, Hitler's body was taken up the stairs of the bunker, his shoes protruding from under the simple covering.

A mixture of Russian servicemen and US war correspondents pictured by the ruins of the New Reich Chancellery in July 1945. (NARA)

"Immediately in front of the bunker door, in the Reich Chancellery garden, his body was laid out next to Eva's in a small depression," recalled Linge, "where gasoline was poured over the cadavers and an attempt was made to set light to them. At first this proved impossible. As a result of the various fires in the parkland there was a fierce wind circulating which smothered our attempts to set the bodies alight from a few metres distance. Because of the relentless Russian artillery fire, we could not approach the bodies and ignite the petrol with a match."

Linge then went down to the bunker and gathered some signal papers which he twisted together. These were set alight by Bormann and then thrown by Linge on to

The ruins of the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin as seen in July 1945. A battered globe, almost certainly taken from within the Reich Chancellery, can be seen in the foreground. (NARA)

Hitler's petrol-soaked body, which caught fire immediately. "Standing at the bunker entrance we, the last witnesses – Bormann, Goebbels, [SS-Obersturmbannführer Dr. Ludwig] Stumpfegger, Günshe, Kempka and I – raised our hands for a last Hitler salute."[4]

Hitler's dog-handler, Feldwebel Fritz Tornow, took Wulf and Eva's two Scottish terriers up to the Chancellery garden and shot them. With Hitler gone, those who had decided to follow him, then had to make their own preparations. Perhaps the most depressing scene of all, even amid all the death that surrounded the bunker in those last terrible hours, occurred the following day, May 1, when the six Goebbels children were murdered. They were first given a dose of morphine to render them unconscious, then cyanide capsules were broken in their mouths. They were aged between four and 11.

A sofa pictured in the Führerbunker, May 1945. (NARA)

THE LAST WORD

On the evening of May 1, 1945, the BBC's radio programming was suddenly interrupted, and the sound of pealing bells heralded an incredible announcement that was made by Stuart Hibberd: "This is London calling. Here is a news flash. The German radio has just announced that Hitler is dead."

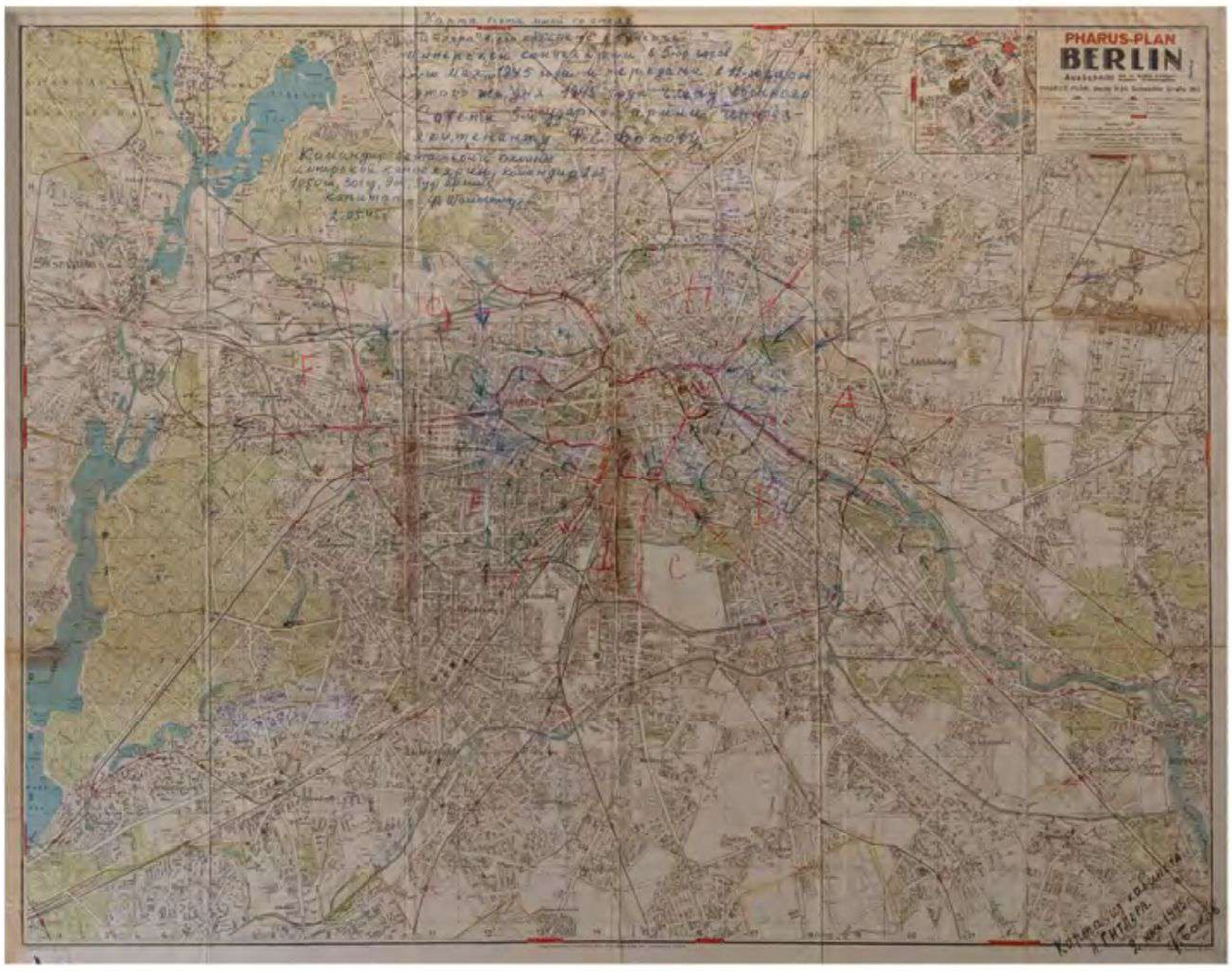
It was all over, the Third Reich was no more, and Hitler was dead. But what had happened to his will? After Heinz Lorenz had been unable to get through to Admiral Dönitz, he had escaped to Luxembourg where he lived under the name of George Thiers. He had approached the British authorities offering to give details of life inside Hitler's bunker in the dying days of the Third Reich, but the offer had not been taken up, so he tried to cross from the British occupation zone into that controlled by the Soviets in December 1945.

Few Germans would choose to leave the liberal west for the oppression of the communist east and when he approached the British checkpoint in the middle of the night, he was stopped and questioned – many Germans were still being sought for war crimes and anyone acting suspiciously was arrested pending further investigations.

An SS cap pictured on the floor in the Führerbunker soon after its capture by Russian troops. (NARA)

Lorenz was taken to the British interrogation centre at Fallingbostel on the southern part of Lüneburg Heath. During his interrogation Lorenz revealed his true name and he admitted that he had been Goebbels' Press Attaché.

During the course of the interrogation, Lance Bombardier Rowe, who had worked in the tailoring business before the war, noticed the unusual bulkiness of Lorenz's shoulder pads. Lorenz was told to remove his jacket and the shoulders were ripped open. Inside Rowe found a number of pages of parchment typed in capital letters. Though the wording was in German, which Bombardier Rowe did not understand, he could see that they were documents of some importance as they seem to carry the signature of Adolf Hitler.



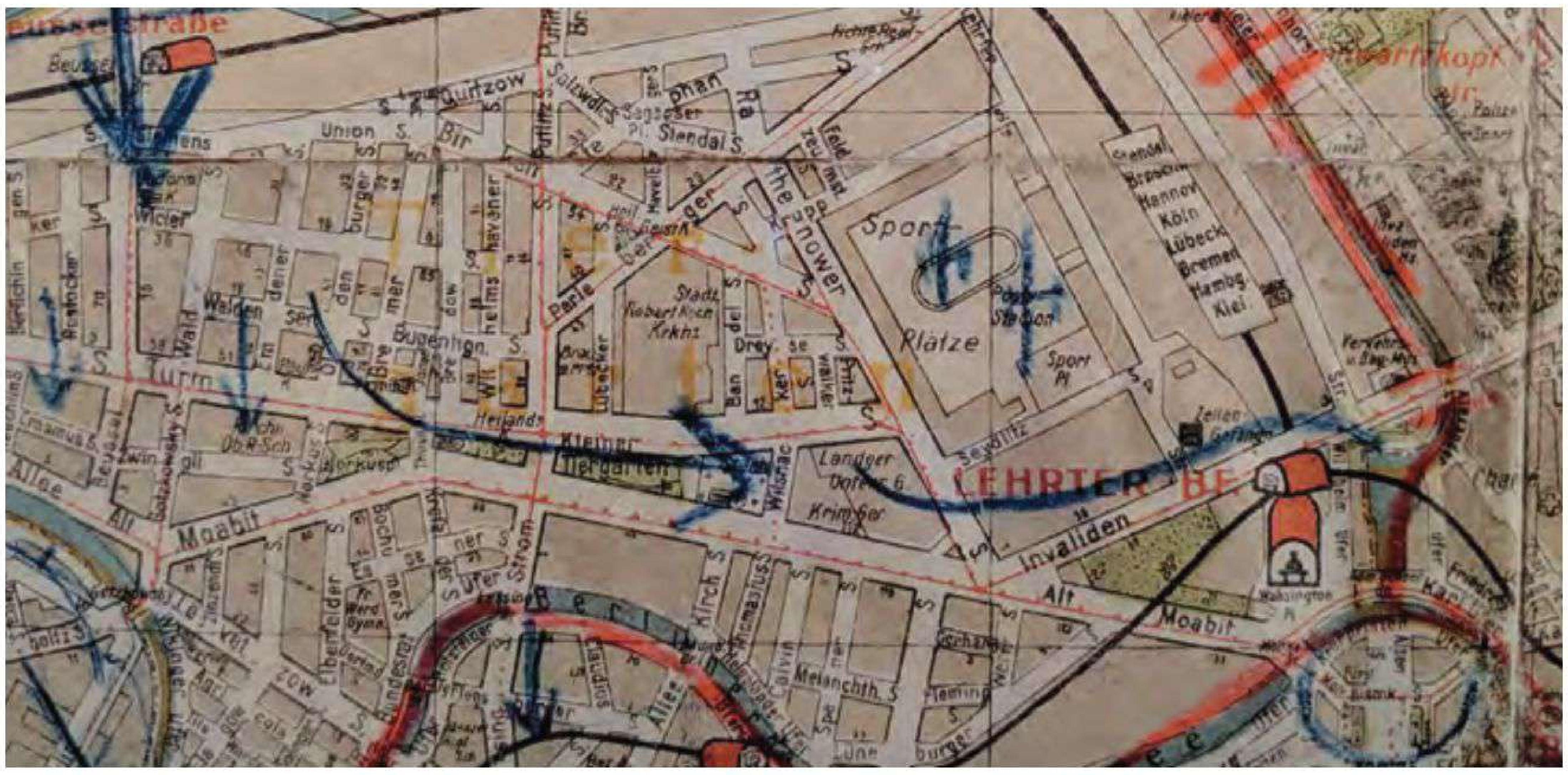
This map was found on Hitler's desk in the Führerbunker by Captain F. Shapovalov on May 2, 1945. The original caption with the map, which is on display in the German-Russian Museum in Berlin-Karlshorst, states: "On 2 May 1945 at 5 o'clock I removed this map from Hitler's desk in his office in the Reich Chancellery bunker, and on the same day of 1945 at 12 noon handed it over to the member of the Military Council of the 5th Shock Army, Lieutenant General F.E. Bokov. Commander of the Reich Chancellery Guards Battalion, Commander 2nd Infantry Battalion 1050, Infantry Regiment 301, Infantry Division 9th Corps of the 5th Shock Army. Captain F. Shapovalov, 2 May 45."

Though it was the middle of the night, the corporal in charge immediately rang his commanding officer, Captain Rollo Reid. A team of five German-speaking British Army soldiers, former Jewish refugees who had been detailed to assist in interpreting captured personnel and documents, were woken and ordered to Fallingbostel. "The telephone rang at 5a.m. one autumn morning," remembered one of the five, Herman Rothman. "We were all naturally fast asleep. I thought it was part of my dream, but the telephone continued to ring. Then I realised it was no dream but something of importance.

"I picked it up and heard Rollo Reid say, 'Please come to the office immediately. I will explain then.' To say it sounded strange would be an understatement. My mind was racing as I quickly dressed, had a coffee and dashed to the office. We all assembled before Reid... Reid immediately ordered one of us to lock the door. Everything appeared to be odd. What could be so important for all of us to be summoned to one room and the door locked?"[5]

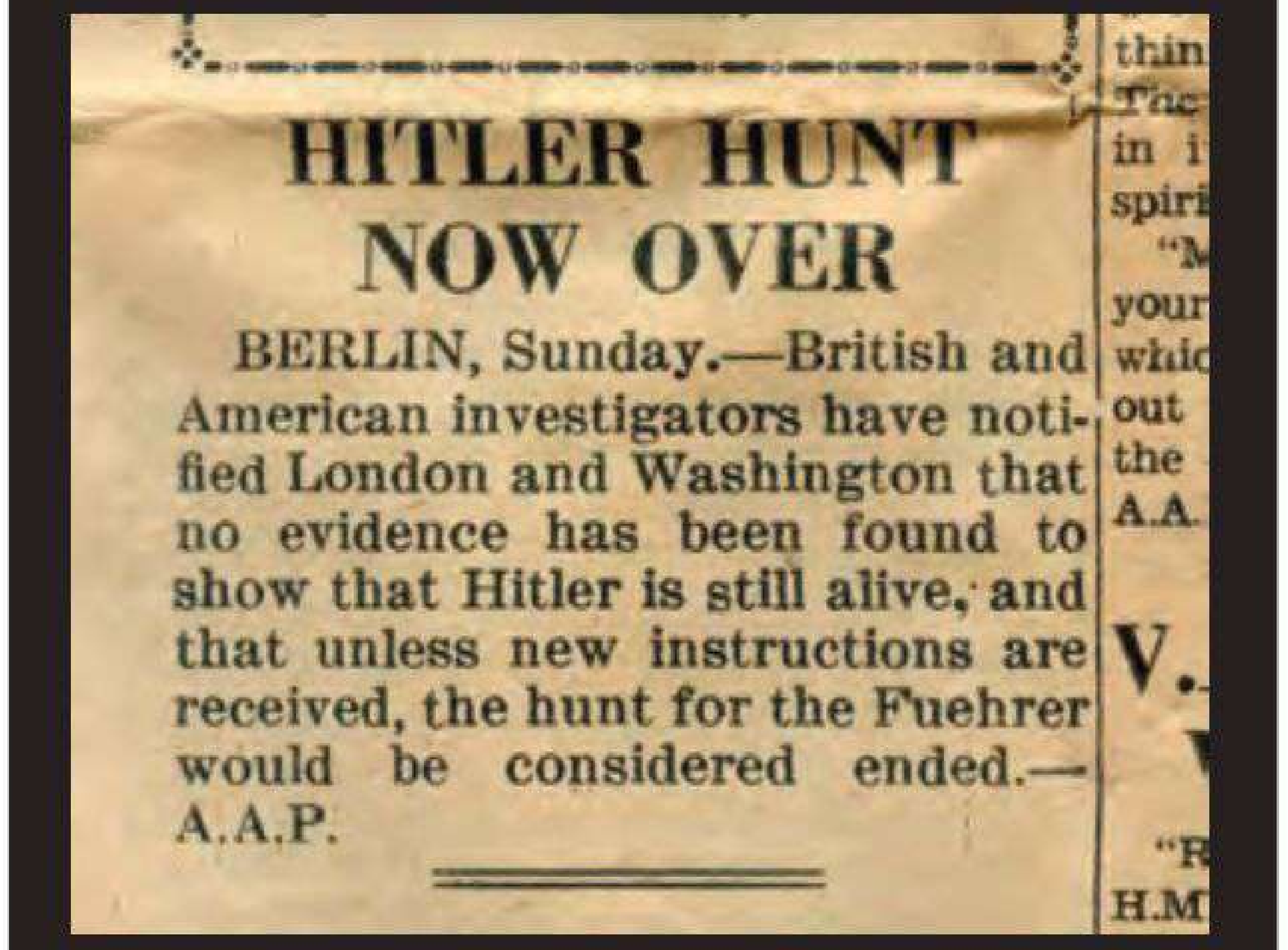
Reid then proceeded to hand round a number of documents amongst the gathered men. "He asked whether we could identify what he we held in our hands," continued Rothman. "This was the first time I had seen such large impressive typed characters. Unanimously we burst out saying 'This is Hitler's Will. Not a copy, but the original.'"[6]

With there no longer being any need for deception, Lorenz told his remarkable story to his interrogators.



A close-up of part of the map picked up from Hitler's desk by Captain F. Shapovalov on May 2, 1945. It shows the area around Berlin's Lehrter station.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES



HITLER HUNT NOW OVER

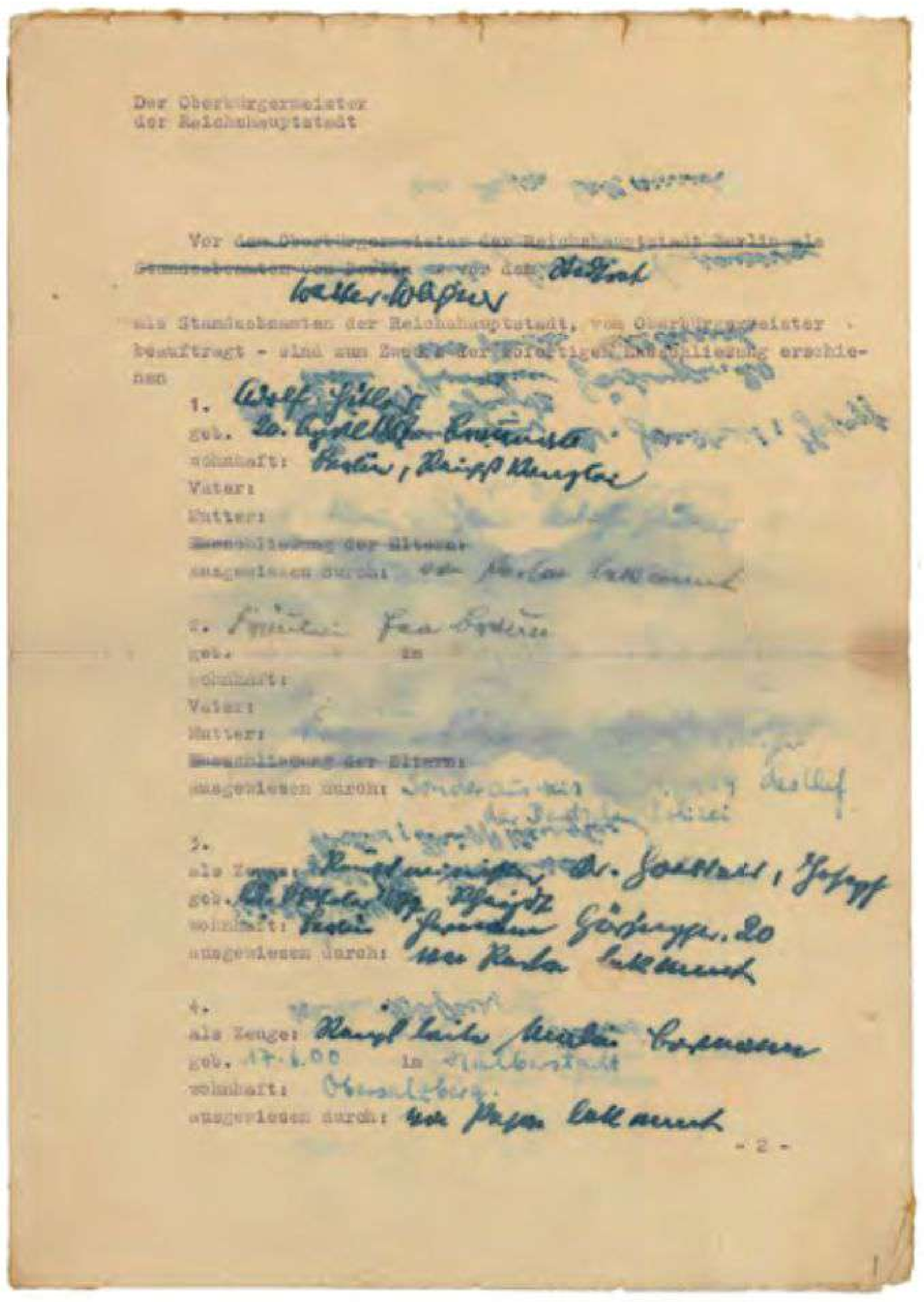
BERLIN, Sunday.—British and American investigators have notified London and Washington that no evidence has been found to show that Hitler is still alive, and that unless new instructions are received, the hunt for the Fuehrer would be considered ended.—A.A.P.

It is, perhaps, worth analysing the oft-repeated claim that Hitler had not been silenced because he did not commit suicide, but instead escaped from the bunker and from Germany. Because his body had been cremated, making immediate identification impossible, and because the area around the Chancellery was in the tightly-controlled Soviet zone of occupation, doubts about Hitler's demise began to gain credence, to such an extent that the FBI began to compile a dossier on the possible whereabouts of the ex-Führer.

Reports flooded in of sightings of Hitler. One man wrote to J. Edgar Hoover in August 1945, claiming that Hitler lived in Innsbruck under the name of Gerhardt Weithaupt. Unfortunately, the writer of the letter lost credibility when he wrote that Innsbruck was in Germany. Surprisingly, Hoover, the Director of the FBI, took the matter seriously, writing back to the individual personally and passing the information onto the War Department. Another claimed Hitler had escaped to Japan, declaring "what better country has he to hide in?"

The most commonly expressed view regarding Hitler's survival came from South America, with various reports being received that he was in Argentina or southern Chile. One such account came from a highly respected person, a Dr Lansdowne, who, in connection with a foundation he had established, had flown numerous times to Argentina. On one of his visits to a ranch at the base of the Andes mountains, he had seen Hitler and a number of his 'henchmen'.

It was certainly the case that some Nazis did escape to Argentina and other countries in South America. This included the infamous SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann, who was eventually seized by the Israeli secret service Mossad. But, as so many independent witnesses have recounted in their memoirs and diaries, Hitler was in very poor physical condition and could not have made the gruelling journey out of Berlin to South America. Plus, the strong corroboration of the details of Hitler's death (though there were some discrepancies in the various accounts) means that there can be little doubt that the Führer died of his own hand on the afternoon of April 30, 1945.



Der Oberbürgermeister
der Reichshauptstadt

Vor ~~dem Oberbürgermeister der Reichshauptstadt Berlin als Gemeindebeamten von Berlin~~ vor dem Stadtrat
Walter Wagner
als Standesbeamten der Reichshauptstadt, vom Oberbürgermeister beauftragt - sind zum Zwecke der sofortigen Eheschließung erschienen

1. Adolf Hitler
geb. [illegible]
wohnhaft: Berlin, Reichskanzlei
Vater:
Mutter:
~~Eheschließung der Eltern:~~
ausgewiesen durch: [illegible]

2. Fräulein Eva Braun
geb. in
wohnhaft:
Vater:
Mutter:
~~Eheschließung der Eltern:~~
ausgewiesen durch: [illegible]

3.
als Zeuge: Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels, Joseph
geb. [illegible]
wohnhaft: Berlin Hermann Göringstr. 20
ausgewiesen durch: von Person bekannt

4.
als Zeuge: Reichsleiter Martin Bormann
geb. 17.6.00 in Halberstadt
wohnhaft: Obersalzberg
ausgewiesen durch: von Person bekannt

- 2 -

The front of Hitler's and Eva Braun's marriage certificate. (NARA)

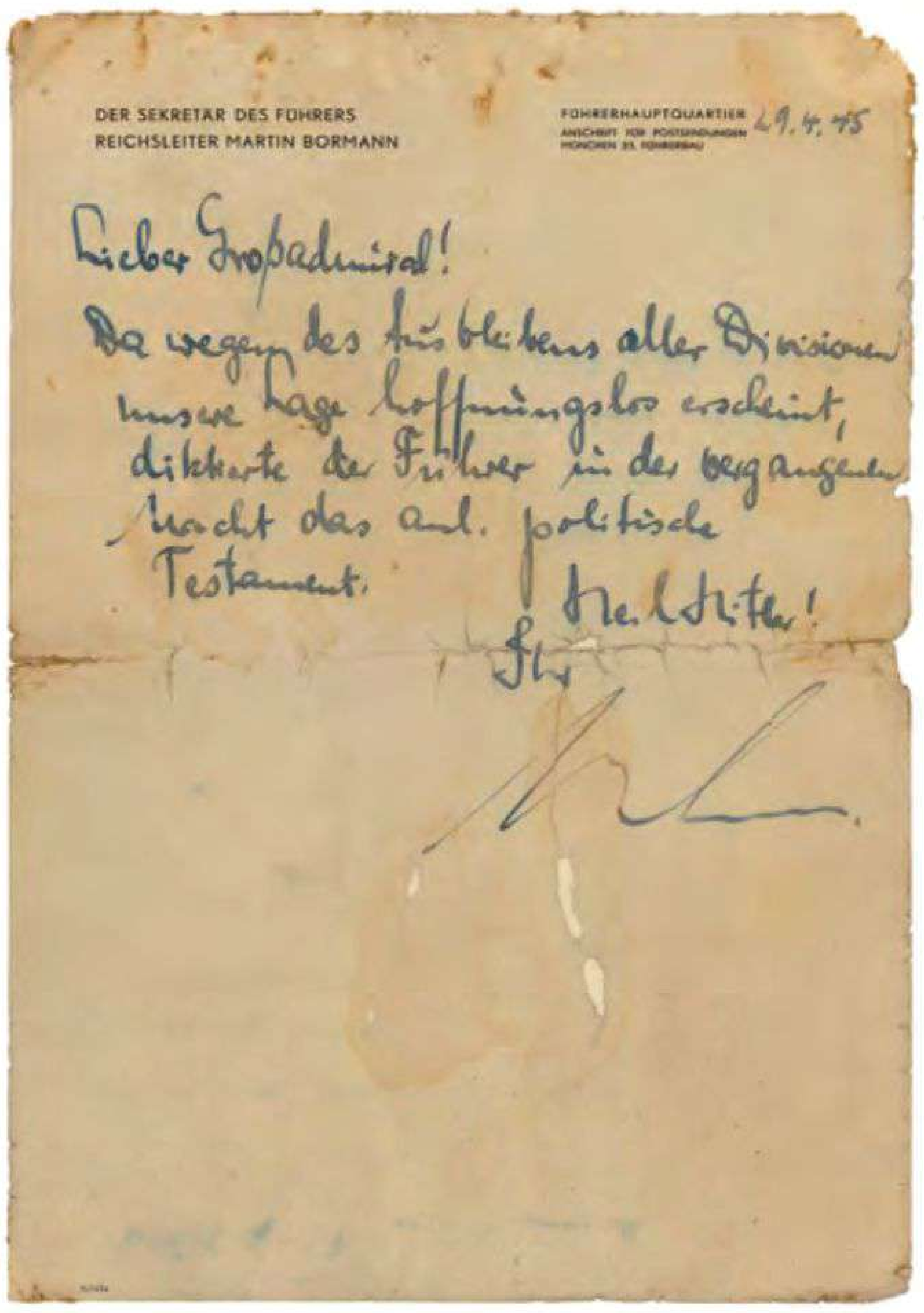
Alarmingly, during this he revealed that there were two other copies of the will that might still be in existence. There were grave concerns that one of these would be published and distributed around Germany at what was still a politically sensitive time. The Chiefs of Staff believed that "the other two copies may subsequently be brought into the open, and that this may be done at a time or conditions which might be inconvenient for us".[7] The remaining two copies simply had to be found.

Armed with better knowledge of those individuals who they were seeking, the British and American authorities set out to track down Zander and Johannmeyer. It as quickly discovered that Zander was living under the alias of Friedrich-Wilhelm Paustin and working as a market gardener in Bavaria. Thanks to the American Counter-Intelligence Corps, he was found living at the home of Martin Bormann's secretary in the village of Aidenbach in the American Zone near the Austrian border.

Zander was promptly arrested and under interrogation he confirmed Lorenz's story. He also admitted that he did indeed have a copy of Hitler's will. As he had found it impossible to deliver the documents to Dönitz he hid them in a suitcase in Munich which he had left with friends. They were easily recovered, along with Hitler's marriage certificate to Eva Braun.

There still remained the last copy of Hitler's will to find. Zander also agreed that these documents were in the hands of Johannmeyer who was, he believed, sheltering with his parents in Iserlohn in the British Zone. Johannmeyer was arrested but, despite all the evidence against him, he denied having the documents. His interrogation was conducted in part by future newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell.

MI6 officer Major Hugh Trevor-Roper had also been flown in from the UK. He became involved in the questioning of Johannmeyer, which lasted for days. Eventually, and almost at the point where Trevor-Roper was about to admit defeat and concede that Johannmeyer would not reveal the truth, the latter suddenly broke down, uttering the words, "Ich habe die papiere" – "I have the papers".



DER SEKRETÄR DES FÜHRERS
REICHSLEITER MARTIN BORMANN

FÜHRERHAUPTQUARTIER 29.4.45
ANSCHRIFT FÜR POSTSENDUNGEN
MÜNCHEN 33, FÜHRERBAU

Lieber Großadmiral!
Da wegen des Ausbleibens aller Divisionen unsere Lage hoffnungslos erscheint, diktierte der Führer in der vergangenen Nacht das anl. politische Testament.

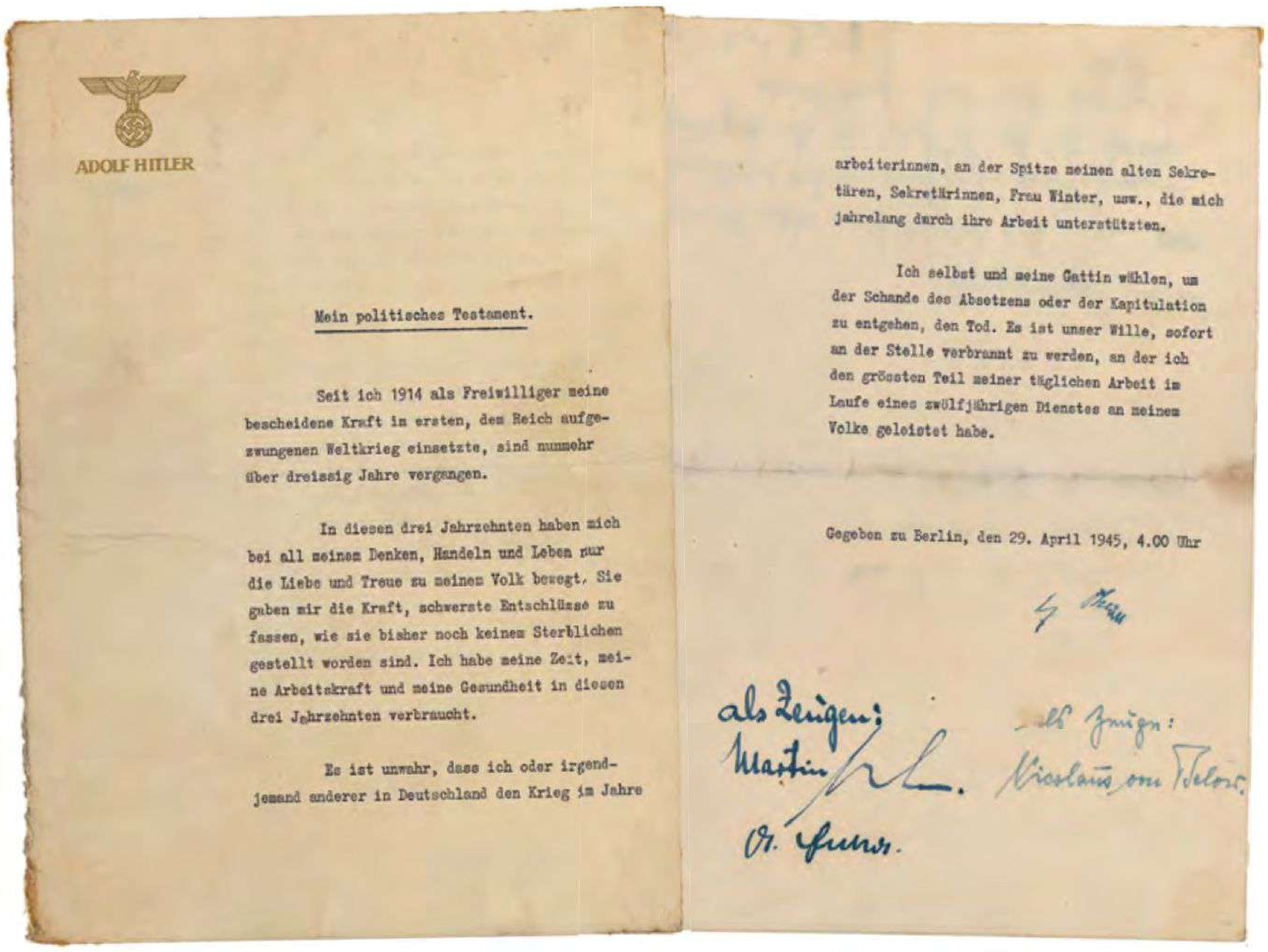
Heil Hitler!
Ihr

The letter that Bormann wrote to Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz, and which transfers the political testament of Adolf Hitler to the custody of the latter. Along with a copy of Hitler's will, it was handed to Hauptschriftführer Heinz Lorenz, who was instructed to leave Berlin at once in civilian clothes and take the documents to Dönitz. (NARA)

Dr. Greg Bradsher, an archivist at the US National Archives, describes the events after 'a long drive to Iserlohn': "At Iserlohn they left the car some distance away, at Johannmeier's [*sic*] request – he did not want the neighbors to see a British staff car outside his parents' home. The two men walked together through the cold night to the house.

"It was now night-time, and the ground had frozen hard. Johannmeier found an axe and together they walked out into the back corner of his garden. Johannmeier found the place, broke the frozen surface of the ground with the axe, and dug up the glass bottle. Then he smashed the bottle with the head of the axe and drew out the documents, which he handed over to Trevor-Roper. They were the third copy of Hitler's private and personal testament, plus a vivid covering letter from Burgdorf to Schoerner [*sic*] describing the circumstances of its dictation, - under the shattering news of the treachery of the Reichsfuehrer SS."

The Allies now had the three sets of documents that had been carried out of the bunker on April 29, 1945. Hitler had been silenced at last.



ADOLF HITLER

Mein politisches Testament.

Seit ich 1914 als Freiwilliger meine bescheidene Kraft im ersten, dem Reich aufgezwungenen Weltkrieg einsetzte, sind nunmehr über dreissig Jahre vergangen.

In diesen drei Jahrzehnten haben mich bei all meinem Denken, Handeln und Leben nur die Liebe und Treue zu meinem Volk bewegt. Sie gaben mir die Kraft, schwerste Entschlüsse zu fassen, wie sie bisher noch keinem Sterblichen gestellt worden sind. Ich habe meine Zeit, meine Arbeitskraft und meine Gesundheit in diesen drei Jahrzehnten verbraucht.

Es ist unwahr, dass ich oder irgendjemand anderer in Deutschland den Krieg im Jahre

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arbeiterinnen, an der Spitze meinen alten Sekretären, Sekretärinnen, Frau Winter, usw., die mich jahrelang durch ihre Arbeit unterstützten.

Ich selbst und meine Gattin wählen, um der Schande des Absetzens oder der Kapitulation zu entgehen, den Tod. Es ist unser Wille, sofort an der Stelle verbrannt zu werden, an der ich den grössten Teil meiner täglichen Arbeit im Laufe eines zwölfjährigen Dienstes an meinem Volke geleistet habe.

Gegeben zu Berlin, den 29. April 1945, 4.00 Uhr

als Zeugen:
Martin
Dr. Goebbels

als Zeugen:
Nicolaus von Below

The first and last page of Hitler's Political Testament, one of the documents carried by Heinz Lorenz. Below Hitler's signature are those of the witnesses, all four of whom died shortly after endorsing the document. Goebbels and his wife committed suicide, whilst Burgdorf and Krebs committed suicide together in the bunker on the night of May 1/2. Bormann's exact time and place of death remain uncertain; his remains were discovered north of the bunker in 1972 and identified by DNA analysis in 1998. Therefore, he was most likely killed the same night trying to escape from the Führerbunker. (NARA)

NOTES:

1. Traudl Junge, op cit, p.183.
2. Rochus Misch, *Hitler's Last Witness, The Memoirs of Hitler's Bodyguard* (Frontline, Barnsley, 2014), p.167.
3. ibid, pp.171-2.
4. Heinz Linge, *With Hitler to the End, The Memoirs of Adolf Hitler's Valet* (Frontline, Barnsley, 2009), pp.199-200.
5. Herman Rothman, *Hitler's Will* (The History Press, Stroud, 2009), p.98.
6. Quoted in Helen Fry, *Denazification* (The History Press, Stroud, 2010).
7. TNA WO 208/3779.

THE FOURTH REICH

Germany was beaten and Hitler was dead, yet there was a last attempt to continue Nazi rule.

In the state of Schleswig-Holstein in the far north of Germany close to the Danish border, the town of Flensburg lies in a deep inlet of the Baltic Sea. Today, its harbour is lined with private yachts and a regular ferry service takes tourists along the coast to Glücksburg, Germany's northernmost settlement with its magnificent Renaissance castle. However, in 1945 it was the seat of the last Nazi government.

When Adolf Hitler dictated his last will and testament, he declared Grossadmiral Karl Dönitz, the Supreme Commander of what remained of the Kriegsmarine, as his successor as the Reichspräsiden - the German head of state. This was first communicated to the admiral by Martin Bormann in a radio message timed at 18.35 hours on April 30, 1945, shortly after Hitler had committed suicide: "Grand Admiral Dönitz, in place of the former Reichmarshall Göring, the Führer has designated you as his successor. Written authorization on the way. Immediately take all measures required by the present situation."

This was followed by a further radio message at 15.18 hours on May 1, the original of which was signed by both Goebbels and Bormann. "Grand Admiral Dönitz: (Top Secret! Only via officer.) Führer deceased yesterday at 3.30 P.M. Testament of April 29 appoints you Reich President, Minister Goebbels Chancellor, Reichsleiter Bormann Party Minister, Minister Seyss-Inquart Foreign Minister. On the Führer's instructions the testament sent out of Berlin to you and to Field Marshal Schörner, to assure its preservation for the people. Reichsleiter Bormann will try to get you today to orient you on the situation. The form and time of announcement to the troops and public are left to you."[1] ⮚

As the remnants of the Nazi command attempted to cling to power, most of Germany's citizens were dealing with the reality of life as the war in Europe came to an end. Here three Berlin residents transport wood to their dwellings in May 1945. (NARA)

A view of the devastation wrought by the RAF and USAAF, and the Red Army offensive, on Berlin. This is the area behind the Air Ministry, the Reichsluftfahrtministerium, as pictured soon after the German surrender in May 1945. (NARA)

Albert Speer was with Dönitz at Plön to the south of Keil when the latter received the messages. Dönitz was furious, not at having been appointed Hitler's successor, but at having been told by Hitler who would hold the key positions. Dönitz was particularly incensed at having Goebbels and Bormann forced upon him. The admiral knew that he would have to seek surrender terms and that any German government which included those individuals would never be recognised by the Allied governments.

Speer asked Dönitz what he intended to do if the two men turned up in Schleswig-Holstein. "I absolutely will not cooperate with them in any case," the latter replied. Speer and Dönitz agreed to keep the message a secret and if Goebbels and Bormann managed to escape from Berlin they would be arrested.

Another picture of the Reichsluftfahrtministerium on Wilhelmstrasse, this one taken in July 1945. (NARA)

THE FLENSBURG GOVERNMENT

On May 3, 1945, Dönitz established his government at Flensburg, sitting at the Naval Academy. Dönitz had transferred his headquarters to Flensburg to evade the rapidly advancing British troops, taking up quarters on the passenger ship *Patria* which was docked in the harbour.

With the Reichsluftfahrtministerium as a backdrop, a Russian and an American soldier engage in a conversation whilst standing near the latter's Jeep, July 1945. (NARA)

The new government bore little relation to the one Hitler had prescribed. Nevertheless, Dönitz aimed at maintaining continuity with the old order, and his full cabinet included several high-ranking SS officers as well as a Nazi Party Gauleiter. The same basic security system which had enforced party ideology on the German people was to be reconstituted – it was even thought that this would be useful to the Allies in maintaining order in their occupation of Germany. Of the 350 or so members of the new government, 230 had belonged to the previous security services.[2]

Dönitz was in no doubt that Germany had been defeated and that he had been appointed by Hitler to negotiate a deal with the Allies in the hope that something could be salvaged from the ruins of the Third Reich. Himmler had tried to join Dönitz's government, but as the most hated of all Hitler's acolytes and, after the death of Hitler, the top of the Allies' 'most wanted' list, there was absolutely no place for him in the new government. Himmler, once the most feared man in Germany, went on the run.

It was also assumed by Dönitz that as Bormann and Goebbels had not arrived at Flensburg that neither of them had been able to escape from Berlin. As we have seen previously, Goebbels had committed suicide along with his wife, and Bormann died while trying to flee the capital.

In his bid to retain some form of independently administered Germany, Dönitz aimed at negotiating a series of partial surrenders in the west, while continuing to fight in the east. This was spelt out in the minutes of his first cabinet meeting: "In the current situation the main aim of the government has to be to save as many German people as possible from destruction through Bolshevism." His great fear was that in demanding unconditional surrender, the Allies would, in effect, be handing over millions of Germans and vast swathes of territory to the Soviets. Dönitz hoped that by capitulating only to the western powers, the Soviets could be stopped by a German-British-US alliance.

Dönitz therefore sent Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg, his successor as head of the Kriegsmarine, to Montgomery's headquarters at Lüneburg Heath on May 3. Von Friedeburg took with him an offer to surrender all of the German forces in northwest Germany, together with the remaining elements of Army Group Vistula which was still facing the Soviets. Monty was, of course, quite happy to accept the unconditional surrender of all the German troops in northern Germany, as well as those in Denmark and the Netherlands, including all the German naval vessels in those areas. But he pointed out that he could not receive the surrender of the forces facing the Red Army and that this could only be done directly with the Soviets. Montgomery enforced his insistence on the immediate surrender of the German forces

A view of the battered shell of Berlin's Potsdamer Station after the German surrender in May 1945. (NARA)

as he had proposed, otherwise he would recommence operations.

NO DEAL

Dönitz had little choice but to agree to Montgomery's terms, but he still hoped that an independent German government would be allowed to function, albeit under the jurisdiction of the Allied powers. However, the decision was taken by the Allied powers that the Flensburg government had no legal authority, nor had it any mandate from the German people. The Allied position was that as a result of its complete defeat, Germany had been left without a government, creating a vacuum that the direct assumption of supreme authority by the Allies would replace. Though the Flensburg government had appointed a Minister for Foreign Affairs, this individual was not accorded diplomatic recognition by any of the Allied or other remaining neutral countries.

Try as he did, all further approaches by Dönitz were ignored by the Allied representatives. Despite a recommendation from Speer that the Flensburg government should dissolve itself, Dönitz and his supporters still hoped that the Allies would turn to him to administer the post-war Germany. It was not to be.

Stalin voiced his belief that the Dönitz government was little different from the previous administration and that if allowed to resume control over Germany, fascism would soon raise its head again. He demanded that the Flensburg government should be dissolved without delay.

Throughout this period, British troops had continued to move up towards Flensburg until Dönitz's government controlled nothing more than the tiny enclave where it resided. British and American newspaper reporters arrived at Flensburg, as did Allied officers, on various fact-finding missions. All SS uniforms, worn with such boastful arrogance in former times, swiftly disappeared, as did some of those who had worn them.

"Die Stärke der Roten
Armee besteht darin,
daß sie keinen Rassenhass
gegen andere Völker, auch
nicht gegen das deutsche Volk
hegt und hegen kann, daß sie
im Geiste der Gleichberechtigung
aller Völker und Rassen, im
Geiste der Achtung der Rechte
anderer Völker erzogen ist.

German civilians pictured pumping water out of Berlin's damaged sewers, July 1945. The ruins of the Propaganda Ministry, Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) on Wilhelmplatz can be seen in the background. In the foreground is one of the many Russian signs which were erected by the Soviet authorities all over Berlin. (NARA)

The ruins of Anhalter Station, after it had been all but destroyed by the RAF and USAAF and the final fighting for Berlin, pictured in the summer of 1945. (NARA)

On May 12, 1945, Allied representatives arrived in Flensburg to administer the dissolution of the sham government. This finally took place on May 23, with Dönitz, Speer and other of its members being taken prisoner. The last vestiges of the Nazi regime had been removed from Germany.

NOTES:

1. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (Phoenix, London, 1995), p.651.
2. Ian Kershaw, *The End, Germany 1944-45* (Penguin, London, 2012), p.359.

SURRENDER

While it was accepted by the Germans that they had been defeated, arranging the means by which the fighting could be brought to a close proved far from straightforward.

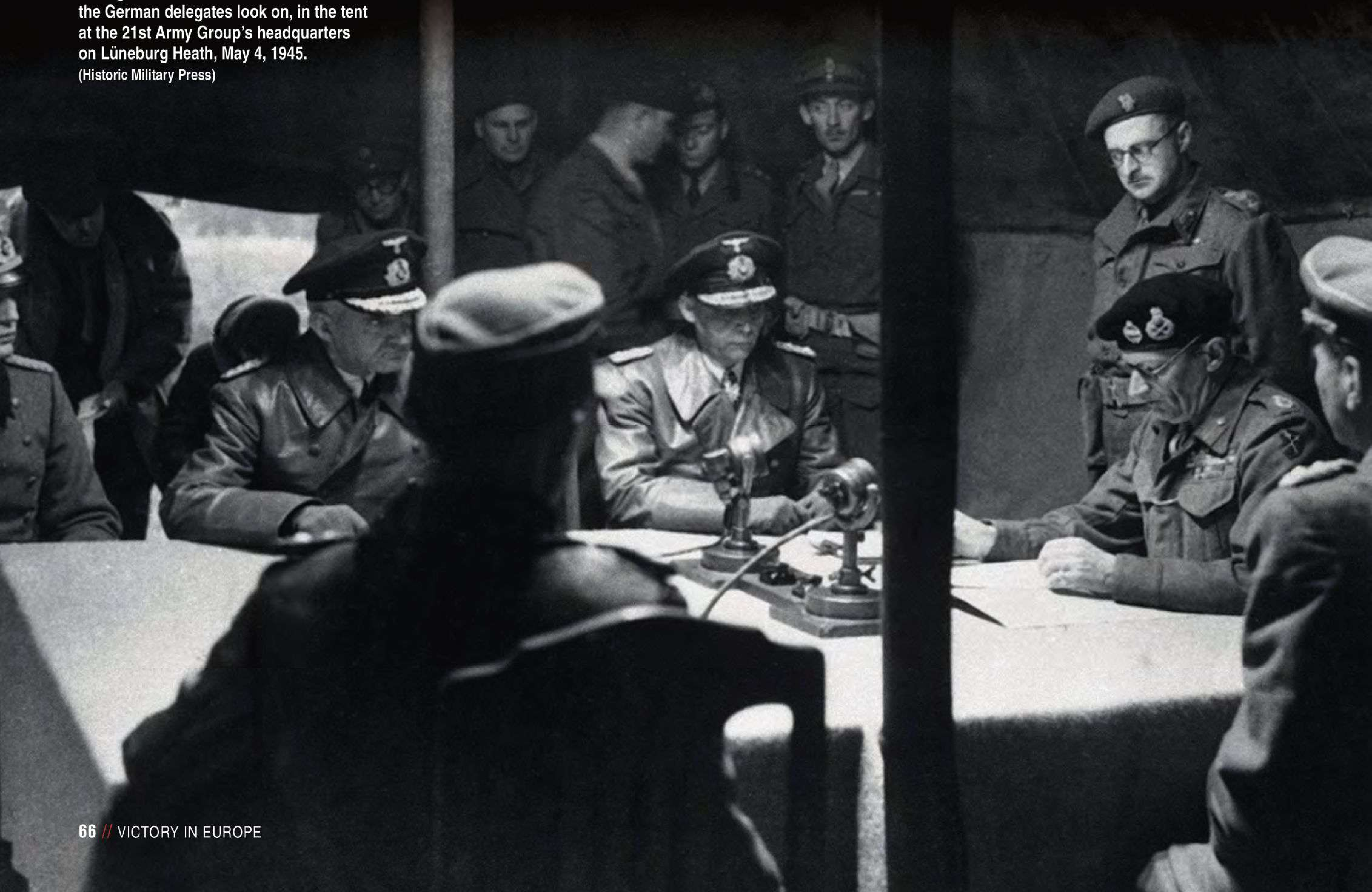
It was at 11.30 hours on the morning of May 3, 1945, when Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg arrived at the British tactical headquarters on Timeloberg Hill, part of Lüneburg Heath to the east of Hamburg. He was accompanied by General der Infanterie Eberhard Kinzel, the Chief of Staff to Generalfeldmarschall Ernst Busch who commanded the German land forces in the north facing the British, Konteradmiral Gerhard Wagner, head of the Operations Department of the German naval staff, and Major Hans Jochen Freidel, one of Kinzel's staff officers. This group was later joined, the following day, by Oberst Fritz Poleck as a representative of the OKW.

They were taken to Field Marshal Montgomery's caravan which served as his mobile office. There the German officers were drawn up under the Union Flag, which was flying proudly in the breeze. According to Montgomery, who later described this epoch-changing meeting, "I kept them waiting for a few minutes and then came out of my caravan and walked towards them. They all saluted, under the Union Jack. It was a great moment; I knew the Germans had come to surrender and that the war was over…

"I said to my interpreter, 'Who are these men?' He told me. I then said, 'What do they want?'

"Admiral Friedeburg then read a letter from Field Marshal Keitel offering to surrender to me the three German armies withdrawing in front of the Russians between Berlin and Rostock." As we know, Montgomery could not agree to this and that those armies had to surrender to the Soviets. But Montgomery said that any German soldiers from those armies fighting the Soviets that came to the British lines with their hands up would automatically be taken prisoner. Friedeburg told Montgomery that it was 'unthinkable' to surrender to the Russians as they were savages, and any captured German soldiers would be sent straight off to work in Russia. Monty was unmoved: "I said the Germans should have thought of all these things before they began the war, and particularly before they attacked the Russians in June 1941."

Von Friedeburg, however, continued to talk about the Soviets. He said he was particularly concerned about the civilian population in Mecklenburg, which was being overrun by the Russians. Again, Monty reiterated that he had no authority to interfere with Soviet operations on his eastern flank.

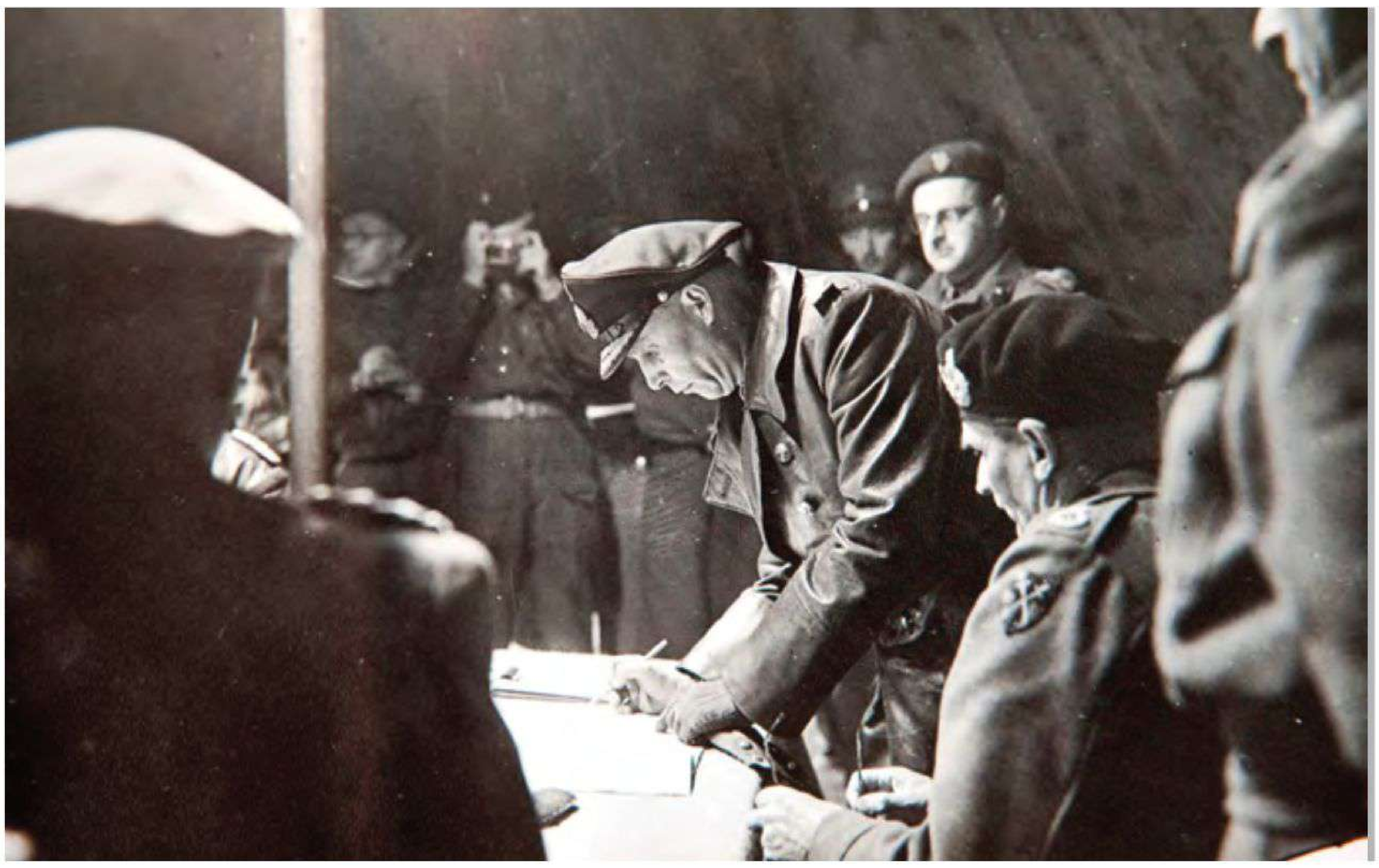


Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery reads through the surrender document, while the German delegates look on, in the tent at the 21st Army Group's headquarters on Lüneburg Heath, May 4, 1945.
(Historic Military Press)

In Montgomery's words, he then decided to "spring something on them quickly". In a bold move he said: "Will you surrender to me all German forces on my western and northern flanks, including all forces in Holland, Friesland with the Frisian Islands and Heligoland, Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark? If you do this, I will accept it as a tactical battlefield surrender of the enemy forces immediately opposing me." Von Friedeburg refused to consider this.

LUNCH BREAK

Montgomery decided to allow the Germans time alone to reflect on the stand they were taking by having a break for lunch. He sent the German delegation to eat in a tent by themselves with just one British officer in attendance. It must have been a grim meal. Von Friedeburg, it is said, actually broke down in tears.



Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg signs the Instrument of Surrender on Lüneburg Heath. The document agreed a ceasefire on the British and Allied fronts in northwest Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands as from 08.00 hours the following morning. (Historic Military Press)

Information panels overlook the site where the 21st Army Group's headquarters was established on Timeloberg Hill, part of Lüneburg Heath to the east of Hamburg, in May 1945. (Courtesy of Tine)

After lunch, Montgomery sent for the delegates, meeting them this time in his conference tent. He decided he should give von Friedeburg an accurate picture of the military situation, of which the admiral was not fully aware, by showing him the map of the respective battle lines of the Allied and the German armies which was spread out on the conference table. It clearly showed how utterly hopeless the German cause truly was. This, Montgomery believed, helped to convince von Friedeburg that surrender was the only option.

In a report recounted in *The New York Times*, CBS war correspondent Bill Downs described the surrender negotiations. "After lunch," he wrote, "Field Marshal Montgomery called the Germans back for further consultation, and there he delivered his ultimatum... He told the Germans: 'You must understand three things. Firstly, you must surrender to me unconditionally all the German forces in Holland, Friesen and the Frisian Islands and Heligoland and all other islands in Schleswig-Holstein and in Denmark. Secondly, when you have done that, I am prepared to discuss with you the implications of your surrender: how we will dispose of those surrendered troops, how we will occupy the surrendered territory, how we will deal with the civilians, and so forth. And my third point: If you do not agree to Point 1, the surrender, then I will go on with the war and I will be delighted to do so.' Monty added, as an after-thought, 'All your soldiers and civilians may be killed.'"[1]

Von Friedeburg informed Montgomery that he was not empowered to make such a decision and that he would have to consult with Generalfeldmarschall Keitel, the head of the German armed forces. Two members of the German delegation consequently went off by car to meet with Keitel. "We sent them through our lines into Hamburg," recalled Montgomery himself, "and I sent them with my personal assistant, Col.

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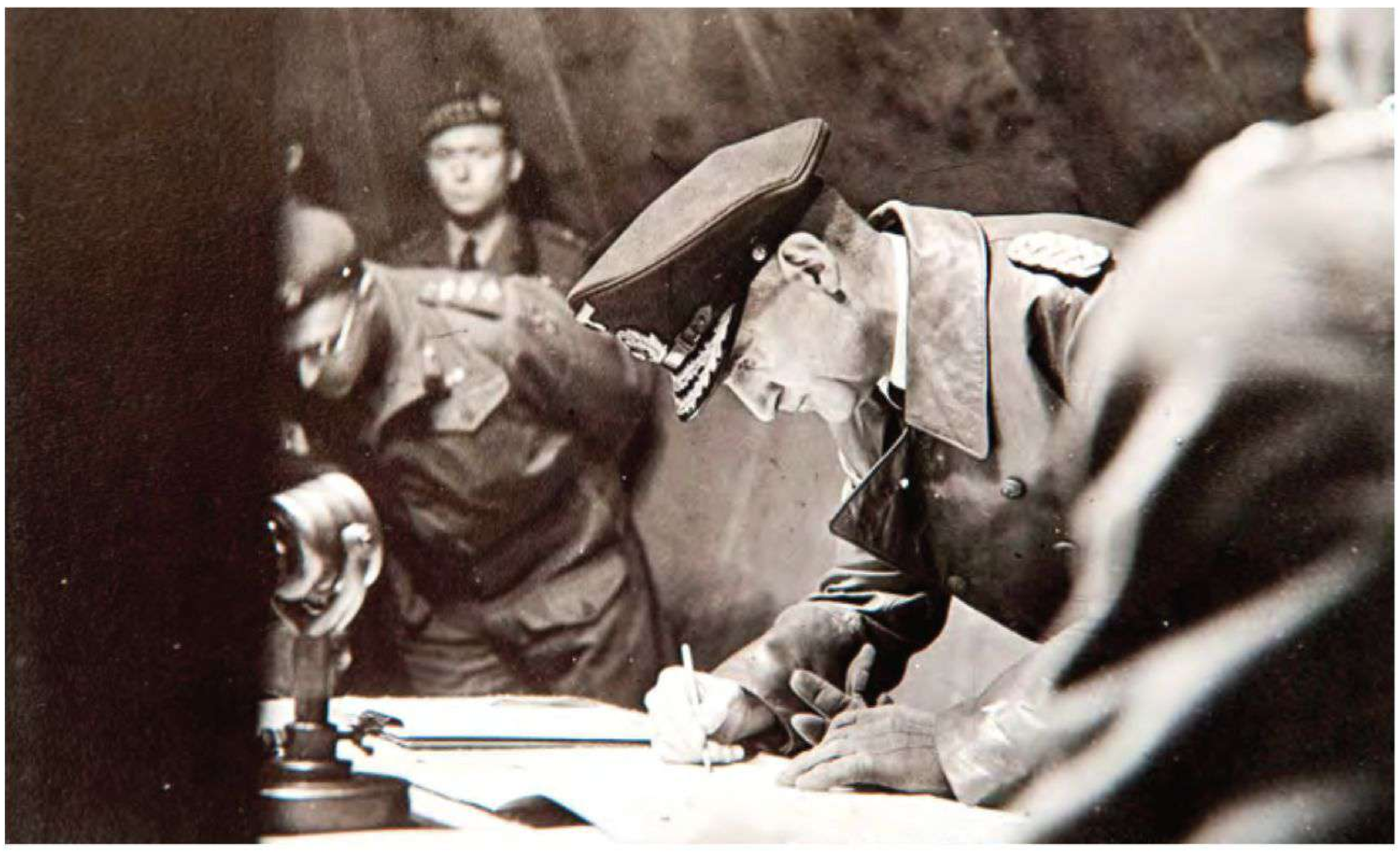
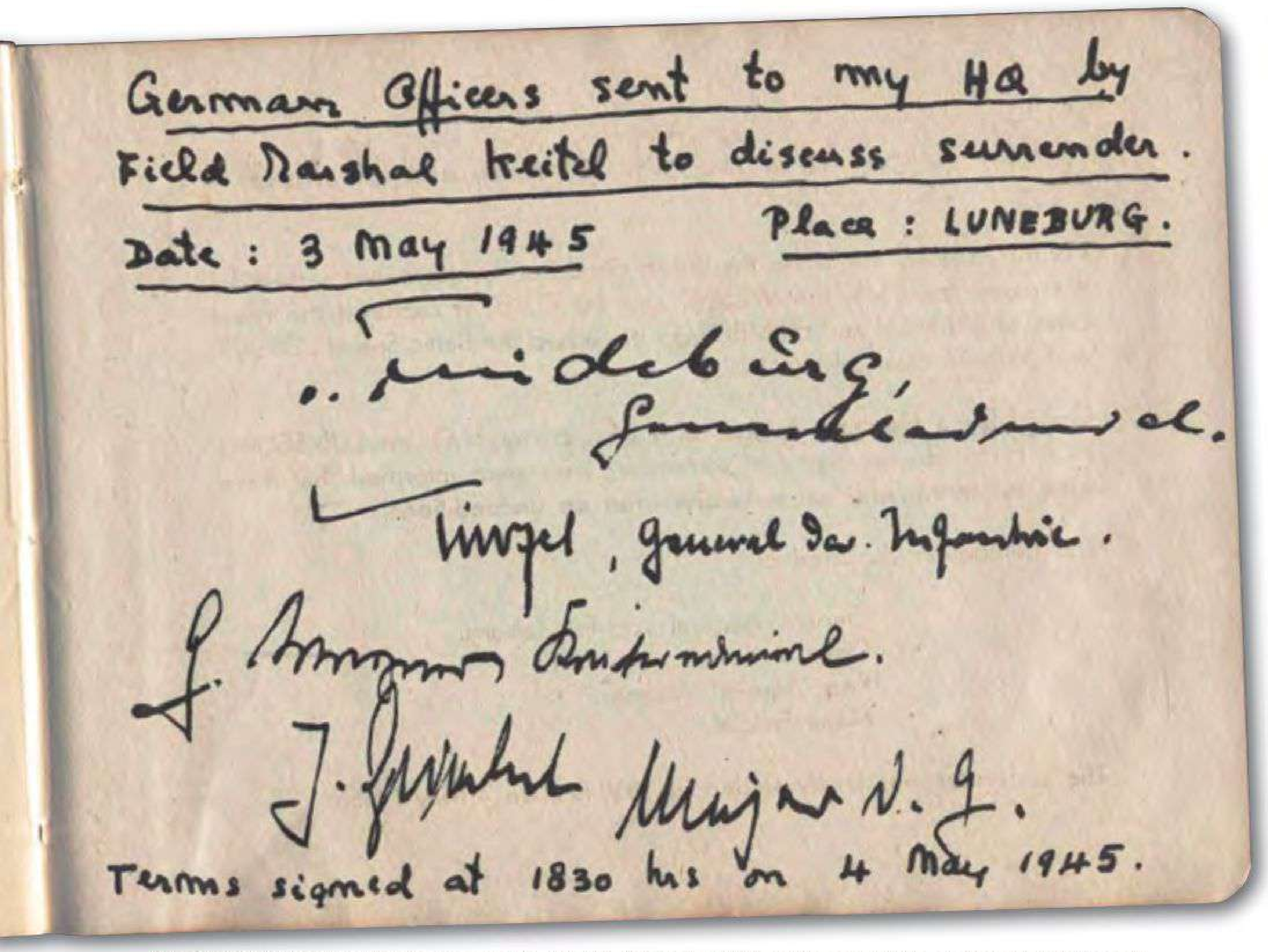


Konteradmiral Gerhard Wagner, head of the Operations Department of the German naval staff, takes his turn to sign the Instrument of Surrender on Lüneburg Heath, May 4, 1945. Of the four initial German delegates, Wagner was the only one who survived beyond the end of the month. The others, as Montgomery himself noted, all "died violent deaths". Von Friedeburg poisoned himself on May 23, 1945; Kinzel also took his own life, in his case by shooting himself, on the same day as von Friedeburg; whilst Friedel was killed in a car crash in France. (Historic Military Press)



German Officers sent to my HQ by Field Marshal Keitel to discuss surrender.
Date: 3 May 1945 Place: LUNEBURG.

v. Friedeburg, Generaladmiral.
Kinzel, General der Infanterie.
G. Wagner Konteradmiral.
J. Friedel Major i.G.

Terms signed at 1830 hrs on 4 May 1945.

The most memorable page in Field Marshal Montgomery's autograph book. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

Not all of the German piecemeal surrenders in May 1945 had been signed with the western allies. Located in an apartment at Schulenburgring 2 in Berlin, this dining room table was the very one on which General Helmuth Weidling, commander of the German 56th Panzer Corps and the last commander of the Berlin Defence District, signed "the surrender order to the Berlin garrison, after which the hostilities [in the city] were terminated". It can be seen in the German-Russian Museum at Karlshorst in Berlin. (Historic Military Press)

Warren. He took them right up the road until they met the Germans – they had a special flag. The other two stayed in my camp all night."[2]

At around 18.00 hours the following evening, May 4, von Friedeburg returned. "First I saw him privately in my office caravan," Montgomery later wrote, "where I told him that all I was interested to hear was whether he had brought back an answer 'Yes' or 'No' to my demand for unconditional surrender. On learning that the answer was in the affirmative, we adjourned to a tent nearby which had been prepared for the signing of the Instrument of Surrender.

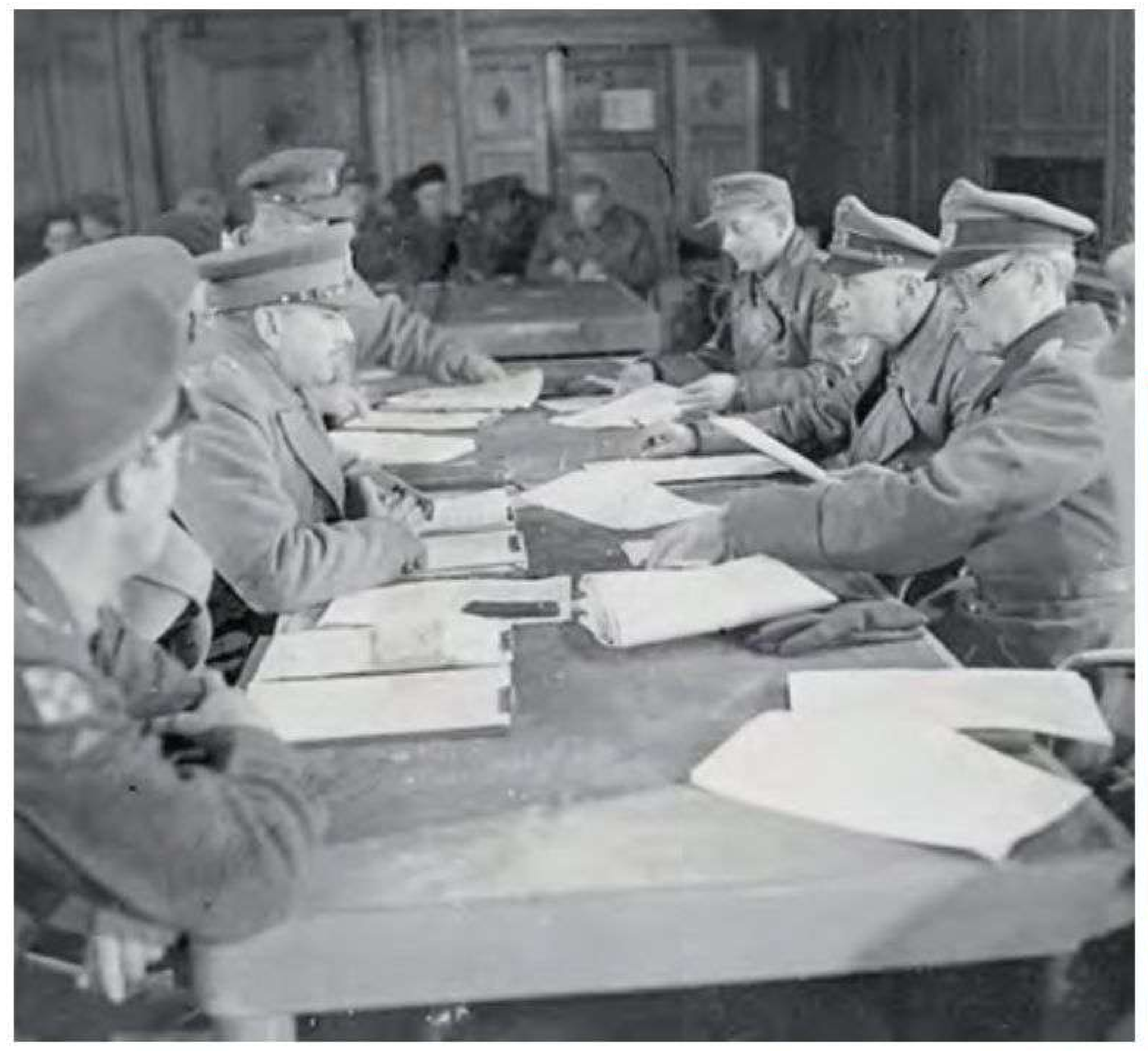
"I had the surrender document all ready," Montgomery continued. "The arrangements in the tent were very simple – a trestle table covered with an army blanket, an inkpot, an ordinary army pen that you could buy in a shop for two pence. There were two BBC microphones on the table. The Germans stood up as I entered; then we all sat down round the table… I read out in English the Instrument of Surrender. I said that unless the German delegation signed this document immediately, and without argument on what would follow their capitulation, I would order the fighting to continue."[3]

A special correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, R W Thompson was another reporter present on Lüneburg Heath who witnessed the events of that fateful Friday. "For a short time, we waited, and then, just before six, we walked up to where above a small cluster of caravans that is Monty's headquarters, the Union Jack fluttered in the still cold breeze. A square table with a plain grey army blanket showed under the rain flaps of a tent, around it six brown, hard chairs. In this tent we knew this 'piece of paper' [as Montgomery had earlier referred to the Instrument of Surrender] would be signed.

"Presently Monty walked down the steps of his caravan, the 'piece of paper' in one hand, the other hand stuffed deep in his battledress pocket. And then they came through the woodland. Two British staff officers walked with Friedeburg and behind them followed in pairs Kinzel and Wagner, Friede and a new arrival, Col. Polleck [*sic*]. Von Friedeburg climbed the steps of the Field-Marshal's caravan alone and entered.

"It was 6.20 when he emerged from the caravan, and the small cavalcade, led by two British staff officers, walked across to the tent with the simple table. There they stood, each at his chair, waiting. Two minutes later Field-Marshal Montgomery followed. The five German officers saluted stiffly and seated themselves after the Field-Marshal.

"Montgomery, who wore his tortoiseshell spectacles, read clearly the text of the 'piece of paper'. 'The German command agree to surrender all German forces to the C-in-C,



Another of the piecemeal surrenders underway on May 5, 1945. In this case Lieutenant-General Charles Foulkes (left centre), GOC 1st Canadian Corps, accepts the surrender of German forces in The Netherlands from General Johannes Blaskowitz (right centre), at Wageningen in the Netherlands. (Department of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada/PA-138588)

HOTEL
DE WERELD

The Hotel de Wereld in Wageningen was the site of the surrender signed between General Blaskowitz and General Charles Foulkes on May 5, 1945. (Frank Cornelissen/Shutterstock)

General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder address the world via motion picture and sound recordings, shortly after the German mission had signed the instrument of unconditional surrender at Reims, May 7, 1945. (USNHHC)

21st Army Group. All hostilities to cease at 8am British double summertime, May 5, 1945. The decision of the Allied Powers [is] final.' Then Montgomery said 'The German delegation will now sign'

"The admiral rose, walked to the place, and with the simple Army-issue pen signed. Then Kinzel, then the others as the Field-Marshal called their names. Only Montgomery's voice rose above the sibilant click of the cameras, and then he said: 'Now I will sign on behalf of the Supreme Commander, Gen. Eisenhower.' As he finished signing, he sighed faintly, sat back, removed his tortoiseshell rims, completely master of himself and his enemies in this great moment. 'That concludes the formal surrender.' The tent flaps were let down as details were discussed and we walked away."

A PERSONAL TASK

The surrender document, however, was not the only item that Montgomery asked the Germans to sign. Since leaving the UK to take command of the Eighth Army in 1942, he had carried with him an autograph book, the first entry in which had been that of Winston Churchill upon Montgomery's departure for Egypt. Throughout the following years, Montgomery had added the signatures of various statesmen and generals he had encountered.

With these high-ranking German officers present, whose names were on the paper which signified the start of the end of the war in Europe, Montgomery had an opportunity which could not be missed. So, after signing the Instrument of Surrender, the five officers were duly requested to add their autographs to Monty's little book.

PIECEMEAL SURRENDERS

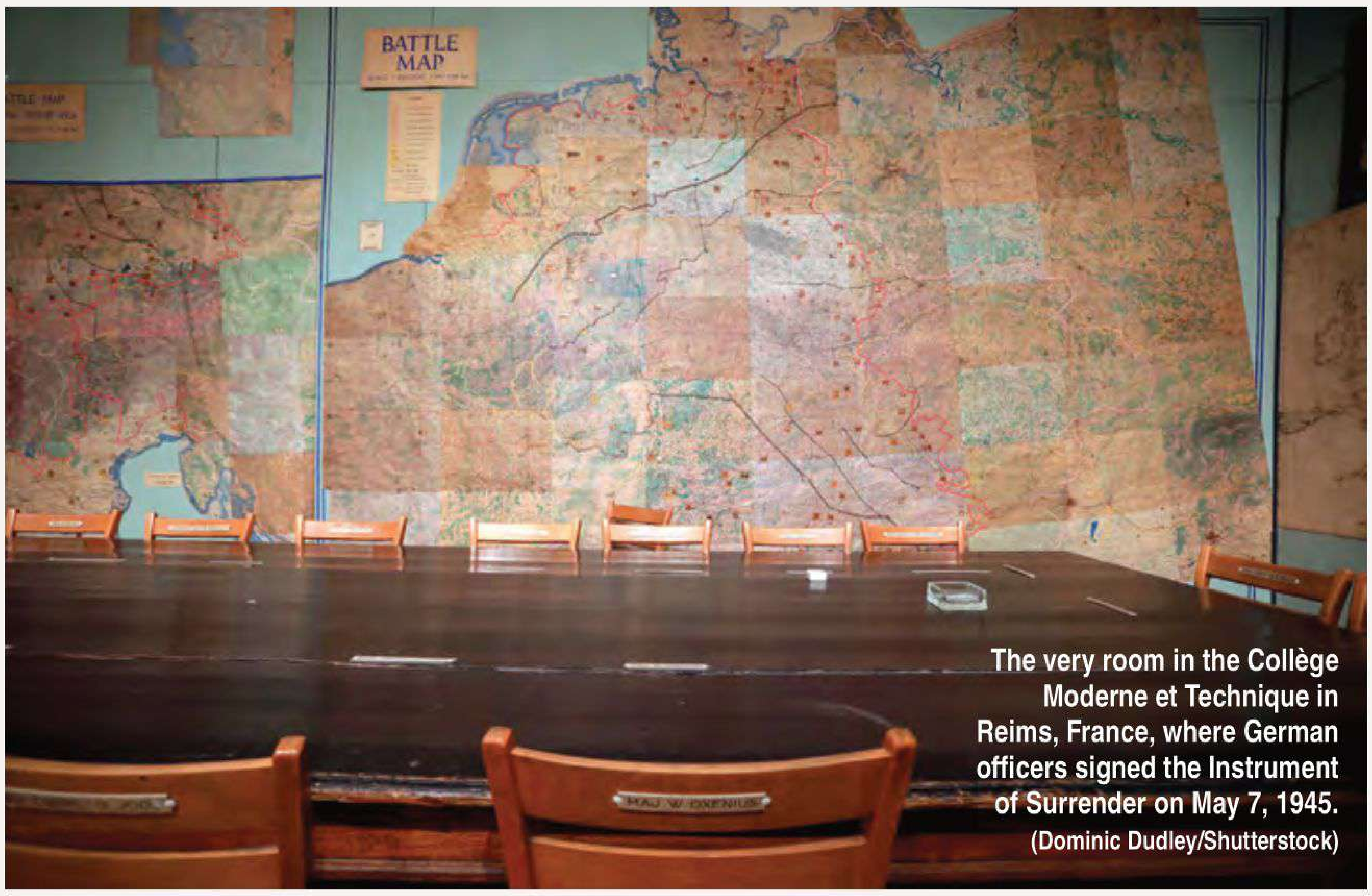
The capitulation at Lüneburg Heath was one of a number of separate German surrenders. It was Dönitz's aim to drag out the surrenders in the west while continuing to resist the Soviets in the east. He did not want a general surrender to the Allies as a whole. The great enemy of Fascism was still seen to be Bolshevism, and the hope among some in the German high command was that the democracies would join with their former enemy in the fight against the Soviets. Unsurprisingly, however, many German formations had already given up the fight.

Hardly had the first Allied troops crossed the Austrian border when the news broke, on April 29, 1945, that the German command in Italy had surrendered. The capitulation was effective at midday on May 2 and included the Austrian provinces of Vorarlberg, Tirol, Salzburg, and part of Carinthia (Kaernten), the areas into which troops of the US 6th Army Group were moving.

As if to illustrate the scale of the German collapse, on May 3, the men of the US 82nd Airborne Division accepted the surrender of some 140,000 German soldiers of the 21st Army, while further north, at Schwerin, some 155,000 men, mainly of the Third Panzer Army, including its commander General von Manteuffel, gave themselves up to the US 8th Division. The German forces in Bavaria and southwest Germany similarly signed a separate surrender with the Americans at Haar, near Munich, that came into effect on May 6. However, Generalmajor Franz Böhme, in command of the 400,000-strong occupying force in Norway refused to capitulate until there was a general surrender of all German forces by the Wehrmacht (it is worth noting that Eisenhower ruled that Norway would constitute a political rather than a tactical surrender, and thus would have to await negotiations at which Russian representatives would be present).

Nevertheless, the various surrenders to the British and Americans had managed to cease hostilities between them and the Germans on almost all the western fronts. Meanwhile, German forces in the east continued to resist or were ordered to fight their way westwards. Eisenhower could see that the Germans were trying to create a breech between the Allies, with all the dangers that might ensue if Stalin thought that that Britain and the United States were seeking to form a separate peace with the enemy. He promptly cabled Moscow that he intended to inform the Germans that they would have to surrender all forces facing the Red Army to the Russians and that he wanted the surrender on both Eastern and Western fronts to be made simultaneously. The Russians in turn authorized Major General Ivan Susloparoff, their liaison officer at SHAEF, to represent Soviet interests in any negotiations with the Dönitz government.

Senior Allied delegates celebrate at Reims on May 7, 1945, shortly after General Eisenhower had addressed the German mission, who had just signed the unconditional surrender document. Present, from left to right in front, are General Ivan Susloparov, Lieutenant General Walter B. Smith, General Dwight D. Eisenhower (holding the pens used to sign the surrender document), and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder. Behind the Soviet General is General Frederick Morgan. (USNHHC)



The very room in the Collège Moderne et Technique in Reims, France, where German officers signed the Instrument of Surrender on May 7, 1945.
(Dominic Dudley/Shutterstock)

REIMS

Dönitz's negotiators arrived at General Eisenhower's headquarters in Reims during the late afternoon of May 5, at which point they were made aware of the Allies' defiant mood. Eisenhower declared that there would be no more partial surrenders and it was made clear to the Germans that there must now be an "immediate, simultaneous and unconditional surrender on all fronts".

"Shocked by Eisenhower's stand," noted the historian Charles B. MacDonald, "Admiral Doenitz the next day sent General Jodl, a strong opponent of surrender in the east, to continue the negotiations. When Allied conferees quickly discerned during conversations on the night of 6 May that Jodl was merely dragging out the talks to gain time, they put the problem directly to the Supreme Commander. If the Germans did not speedily agree to terms, Eisenhower responded, 'he would break off all negotiations and seal the Western Front, preventing by force any further westward movement of German soldiers and civilians'.

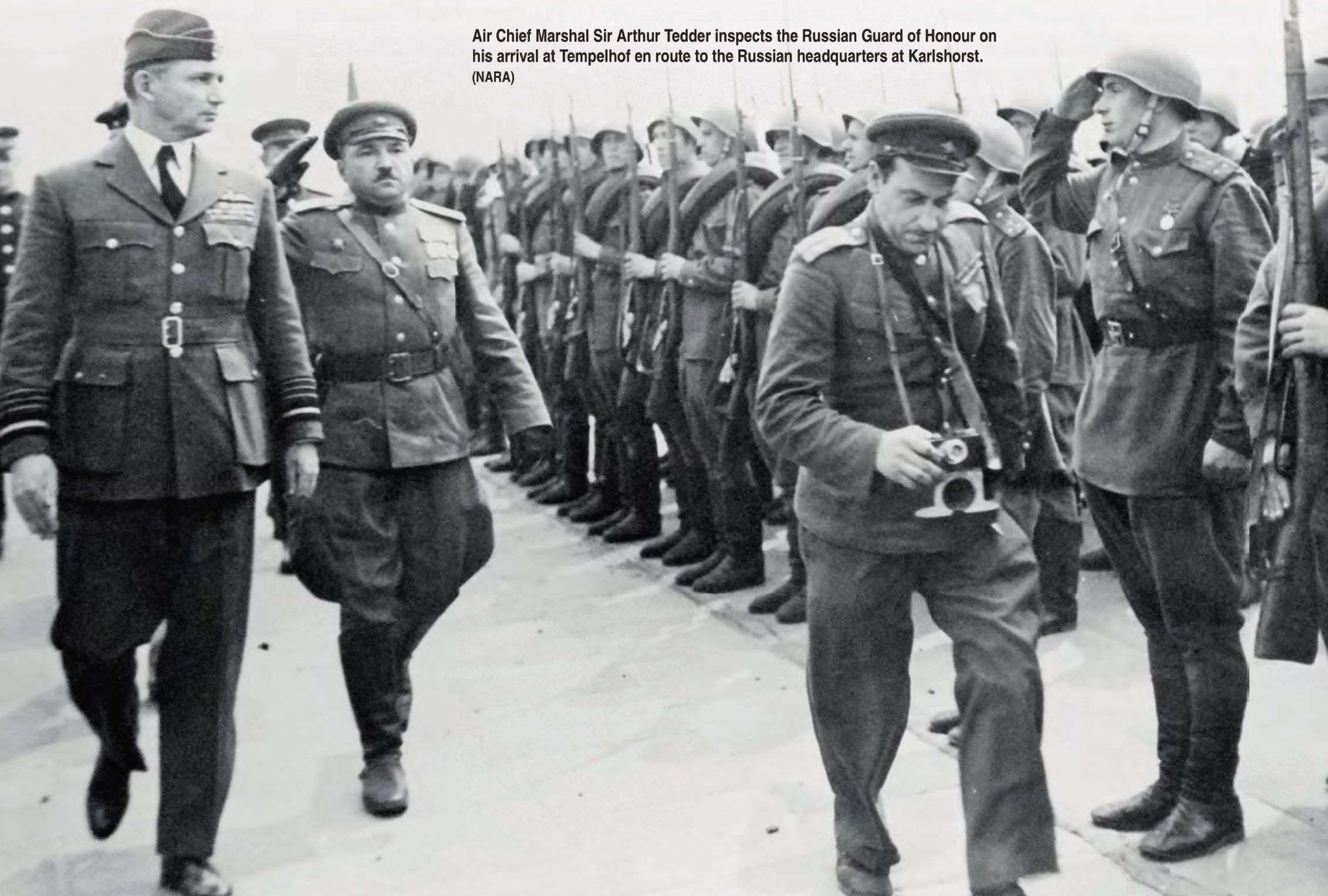
"Impressed with Eisenhower's determination, Jodl telegraphed Doenitz (*sic*) for authority to make a final and complete surrender on all fronts. Although Doenitz deemed the Supreme Commander's demand 'sheer extortion,' he felt impelled to accede since it was Jodl, only the day before strongly opposed to surrender in the east, who insisted that overall surrender was the only way out."

In the early minutes of May 7, 1945, Dönitz, painfully aware that the game was up, granted Generaloberst Alfred Jodl full authority to proceed.

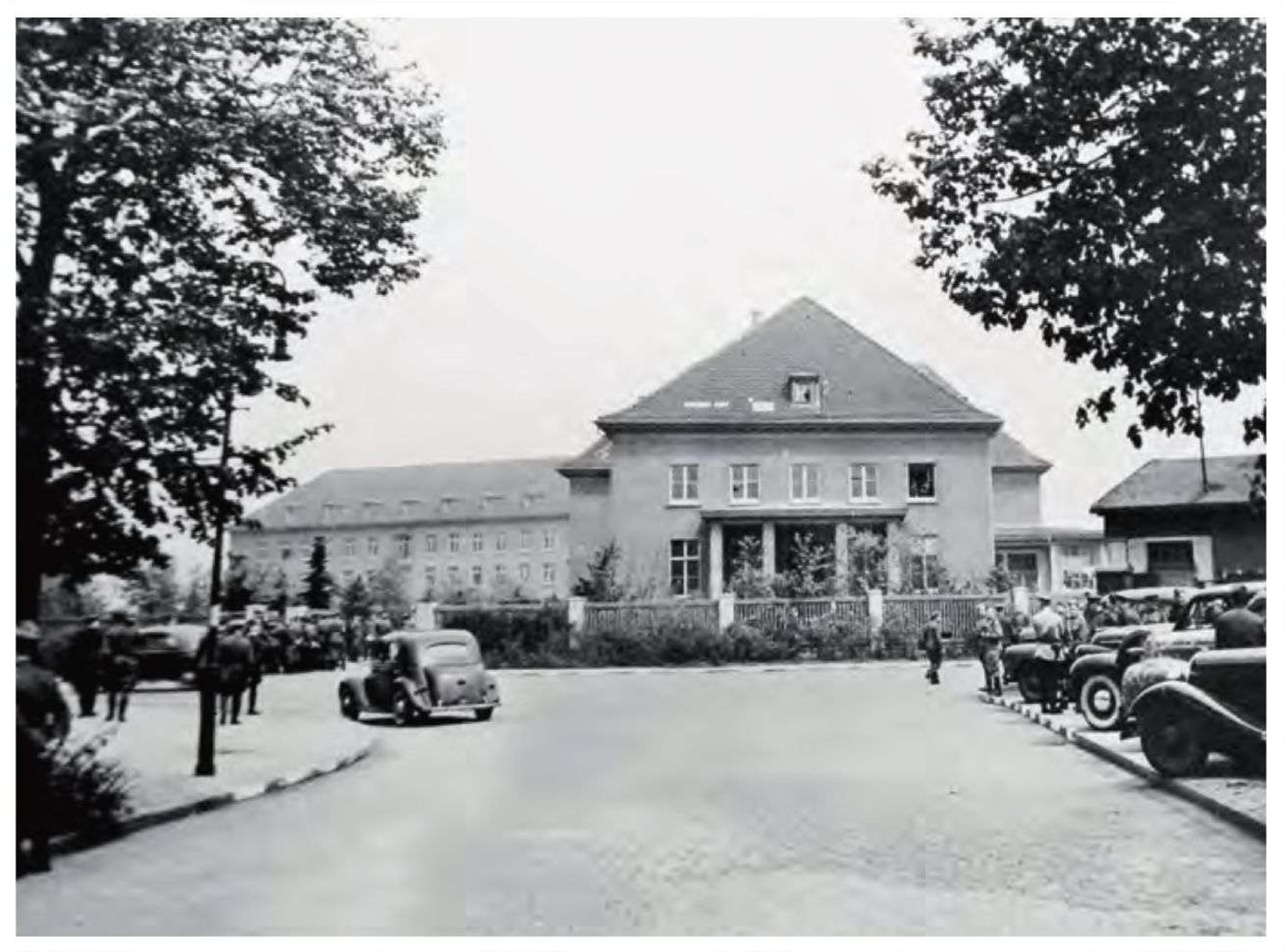
SIGNED IN FIVE MINUTES

At 02.41 hours on May 7, 1945, Jodl finally signed the Act of Military Surrender, agreeing to the unconditional capitulation of "all forces on land, sea, and in the air" under German control. He did so in the presence of von Friedeburg, with the Russian General Ivan Susloparov and French General Francois Sevez acting as witnesses, whilst General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff, signed for the Allied Expeditionary Force.

The Collège Moderne et Technique in Reims
(Dominic Dudley/Shutterstock)



Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder inspects the Russian Guard of Honour on his arrival at Tempelhof en route to the Russian headquarters at Karlshorst.
(NARA)



Pictured at the same time as Tedder's arrival, this is the building that formed part of the headquarters of the Soviet Military Administration and which was used for the surrender ceremony on the night of May 8-9, 1945. (NARA)

Located at the junction of Zwieseler Strasse and Rheinstein Strasse in Karlshorst, Berlin, the former Soviet headquarters in which the surrender that brought the war in Europe to an end still exists. The seat of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany from 1945 to 1949, today it is the home of the excellent German-Russian Museum. (Historic Military Press)

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder and General Sokolovskwe, Chief of Staff for Field Marshal Zhukov, salute during the playing of the national anthems for the Allies at the Soviet headquarters in Karlshorst. (NARA)

Charles Kiley, a correspondent for American military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, was a witness to what was a momentous moment. He later reported on the event: "The surrender was signed in five minutes in the war room at Supreme Headquarters here, 55 miles east of Compiègne Forest where Germany surrendered to the Allies in the last war, November 11, 1918, and the scene of the capitulation of France to the Third Reich in this war June 21, 1940.

"The terms of the surrender were signed in less than ten hours after the arrival of Jodl by plane from Germany, and 34 hours after final negotiations had first begun with the arrival Saturday of Gen. Adm. Hans-George Friedeburg, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy… Eisenhower did not take part in the actual surrender. He remained in his office with his Deputy Supreme Commander, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder, during the ceremonies. Flanking Jodl at the surrender table were Friedeburg and Major Gen. G.S. Wilhelm Oxenius, Jodl's aide.

"There were no dramatics during the surrender. It was conducted on a business-like basis. Correspondents, cameramen and photographers were already in the war room when the first group of high-ranking Allied officers entered at 02:29 hours. In that group were three Russian officers, [as well as] General Carl A. Spatz, and Lt. Gen. F.E. Morgan, Adm. Sir Harold Burrough and Air Marshal Sir J. M. Robb. One minute later Maj. Gen. H.R. Bull, Assistant Chief of Staff, entered the room. At 02:34 [Lieutenant General Walter Bedell] Smith entered, walked to his chair and talked with Morgan and Burrough. Sevez and Col. Pedron arrived at 02:35 and went to their seats.

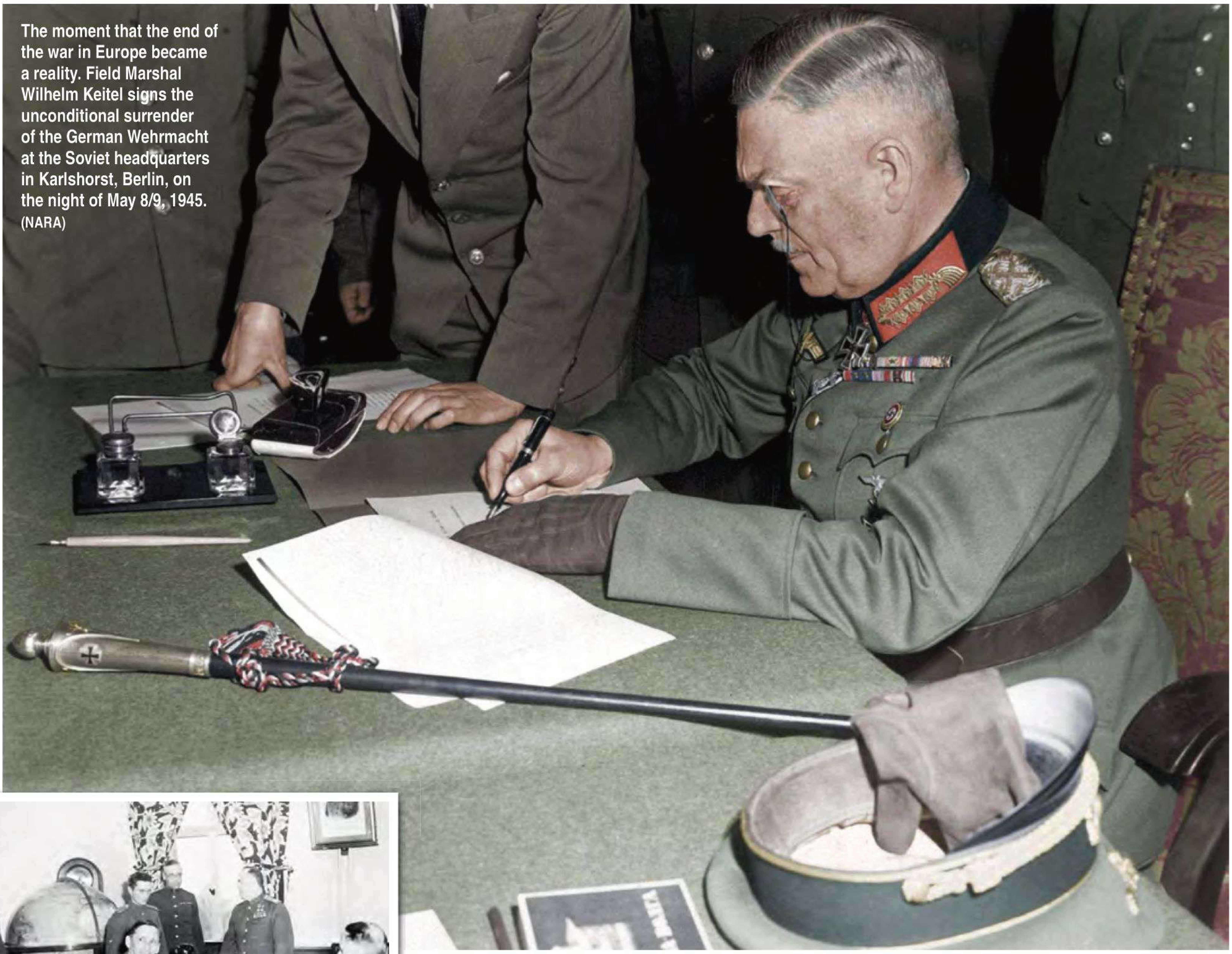
"Two minutes later, [Brigadier Kenneth] Strong, who had taken part in all preliminary discussions with the Germans as interpreter for Smith, as well as in his official capacity as G2, SHAEF, arrived and informed Smith that the German delegation was ready. Smith answered curtly: 'Bring them in'…

"Friedeburg came first, followed by Jodl, erect and expressionless, his uniform neat, his boots highly polished, who walked straight to the center of the huge wooden table, and faced Smith. Friedeburg and Oxenius fell in on both sides of Jodl. The Germans and Allied officers took their seats, Strong standing behind Jodl to interpret."

The formalities then began in earnest. Smith handed a copy of the surrender document to General Susloparov, who remained impassive as his interpreter read it to him. ⏩

Allied personnel pictured arriving at the Soviet Military Administration in Karlshorst for the German surrender ceremony. In the front row, left to right, are Admiral Sir Harold M. Burrough (Allied Naval Commander in Chief), General Carl Spaatz (US Staff), Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder (Deputy Supreme Commander, SHAEF). (NARA)

The same view today. The German-Russian Museum, the building used for the signing ceremony, is directly behind the photographer. (Historic Military Press)



The moment that the end of the war in Europe became a reality. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel signs the unconditional surrender of the German Wehrmacht at the Soviet headquarters in Karlshorst, Berlin, on the night of May 8/9, 1945. (NARA)

Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder (in the centre) and General Carl Spaatz (far right) photographed just after a conference held in the office of Field Marshal Zhukov (standing centre), prior to the signing of the German surrender at Karlshorst. (NARA)

Satisfied at what he had heard, at 02.40 hours Susloparov handed it back to Smith, nodding his head in agreement. Four copies were then given to Jodl for his signature, before being passed around the other signees for their attention.

By 02.46 hours, the process was complete. The surrender had been signed. At this point, Jodl turned to Smith, as Kiley subsequently recounted: "'General,' Jodl began, 'With this signature the German people and the German armed forces are for better or worse delivered into the victors' hands. In this war, which has lasted more than five years, both have achieved and suffered more than perhaps any other people in the world. In this hour I can only express the hope that the victor will treat them with generosity.'

"Jodl broke halfway through his address and appeared on the verge of tears. He regained his composure, however, and finished with a strong voice. His hands were trembling when he finished."

Without speaking, Smith simply nodded his head towards Jodl. The German delegates were then escorted out of the room and taken to meet Eisenhower and Tedder.

Once the documents were signed, and Eisenhower had recorded a short message for the newsreels and radio, it was time to send official word to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, the joint British and American command directing the war in the west. The officers around Eisenhower suggested a number of statements, some quite 'grand', in the hope of coming up with words worthy of such a momentous occasion. The final message that came from Eisenhower was made in his typical concise, straightforward style: "The mission of this Allied Force was fulfilled at 0241, local time, May 7th, 1945."

SURRENDER REFUSED

Eisenhower's words, however, were quickly proven to be premature. When news of the signing of the unconditional surrender at Reims reached Moscow, it was flatly rejected by the Soviet High Command. The fighting, in the east at least, would continue.

Stalin complained that the surrender document differed from the previously agreed text. In any case, he also declared, General Susloparov did not, after all, have explicit permission to sign the surrender papers, even as a witness. Another surrender document would have to be signed, Stalin insisted, by an authorised Soviet representative. This was merely a pretext. Stalin wanted the surrender to be signed in territory won by the Soviets, not that won by Eisenhower's forces. It was also stated, perhaps with some justification, that such a surrender should be made at the heart of the

Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg, Commander in Chief of the Kriegsmarine, signs the ratified surrender of terms at the Russian headquarters in Berlin, early on May 9, 1945. (NARA) enemy's own country, in its own capital, and not in a former occupied territory.

Consequently, many of those who had been involved in the ceremony at Reims were forced to travel to Berlin, and, more specifically, the headquarters of the Soviet Military Administration that had been established in a former Wehrmacht officers' mess, part of what was once a German Army Engineering School, in the suburb of Karlshorst. Clifford Webb, a reporter for the *Daily Herald*, was embedded with the British party: "We met our first Russians at Stendal airfield, close to the Elbe, where the planes carrying the official British party under Air Chief Marshal Tedder, General Eisenhower's Deputy, touched down by arrangement. There we had to await the arrival first of a plane from Flensburg, bringing Field-Marshal Keitel, the chief German signatory, and then an escort of Russian fighters to escort us to the Tempelhof aerodrome in Berlin. Eventually we became airborne again and flew on with a swarm of fighters, circling, zooming and diving all around in the most exuberant fashion.

Generaloberst Hans-Jürgen Stumpff, Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, signs the ratified surrender terms for the Luftwaffe at Karlshorst. (NARA)

The surrender is confirmed by the Allies as Air Chief Marshal Arthur William Tedder takes his turn to sign the document at Karlshorst. (NARA)

"At Tempelhof, Sir Arthur Tedder's party was warmly welcomed by high-ranking Russian officers and all but mobbed by uniformed Russian press photographers. Then the British party inspected the guard of honour of young, smart-looking Red troops, and took up position for a march past. This was a grand spectacle. The Russians held their bayoneted rifles in the forward lunge position, each point only inches from the neck of the man in front. They marched stiffly and with wonderful precision to martial music in a manner that would have 'brought the house down' in any part of the world.

"Hustled into waiting cars, we were driven at breakneck speed through the ruins of Berlin. We came to Karlshorst and were shown into neat, typically suburban villas, for rest and refreshment. Wine, vodka, cognac, red and black caviar, fish, ham and cheese were brought in by trim Russian waitresses.

"At 7pm we went into the school [*sic*]. Interpreters and secretaries were deep in the throes of their struggles to convey precisely the same meaning to technical paragraphs in Russian, English and German. Cases of beer were brought to the building. Tedder, puffing away at his pipe, roamed around obviously enjoying the informality as much as anybody."[4]

KEITEL WAS FURIOUS

As midnight on May 8 approached, the preparations for a re-run of the Reims surrender ceremony were completed. "It was 11.10pm, British time, when all was finally ready," continued Webb, "and we filed into the large, lofty conference room, whose main adornment was the Russian, British, United States and French flags on the wall above the table reserved for Marshal Zhukov, Sir Arthur Tedder and the other Allied signatories…

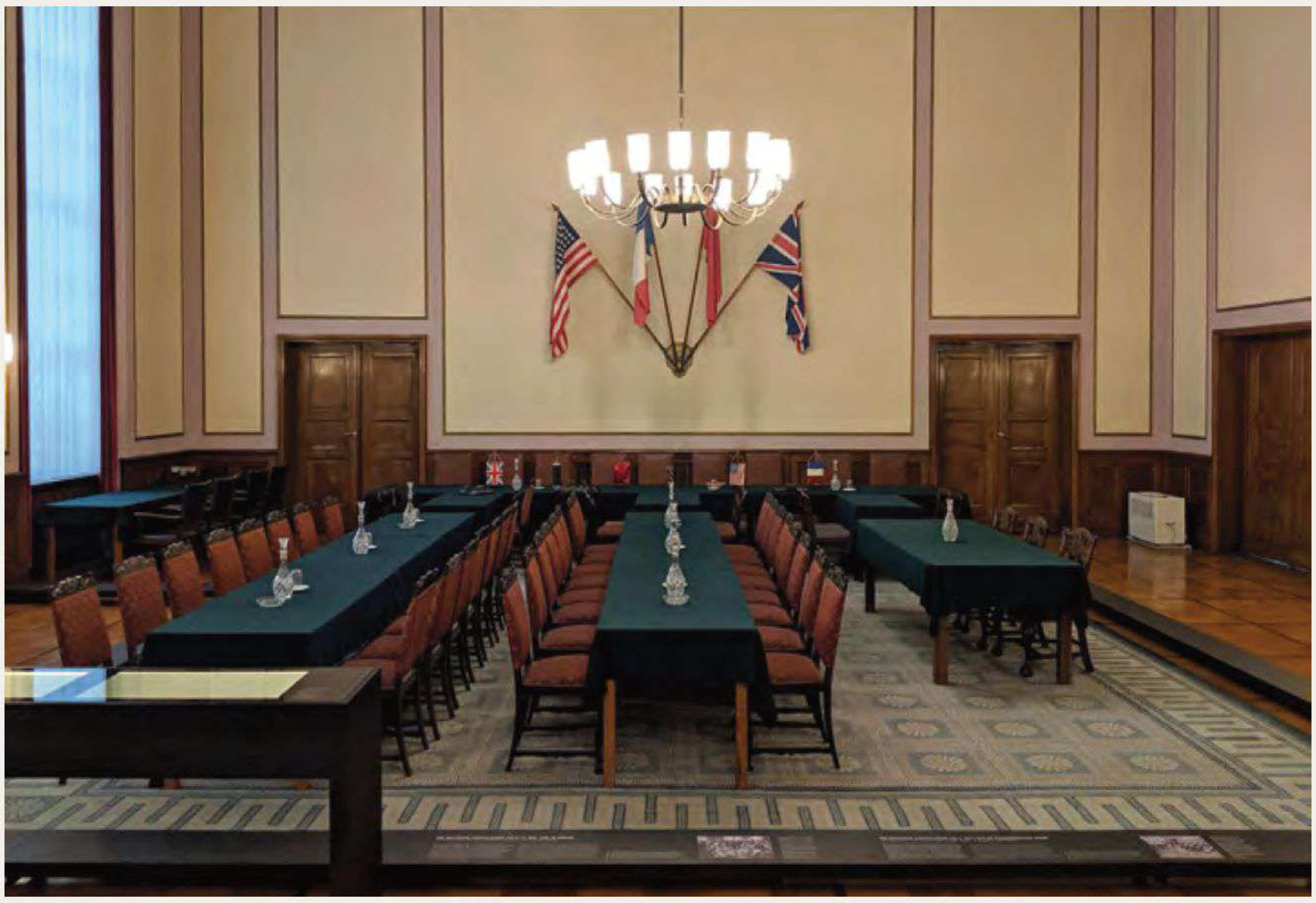
"There was a buzz of conversation, which was hushed as through the wide-open doors the three German delegates, Keitel, Stumpff [Generaloberst Hans-Jürgen Stumpff, Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff] and Friedeburg appeared. Keitel strode to his seat, looked towards the top table, clicked his heels and raised his Field Marshal's baton in his right hand in salute. The other two bowed stiffly and were seated. Keitel, a typically arrogant-looking Prussian Junker, thin-lipped, grey moustached, and pink-faced, screwed a monocle into his left eye to read papers set in front of him.

"Marshal Zhukov put on steel-rimmed spectacles and looked sternly in front of him. Sir Arthur Tedder, composed and absolutely at ease, was probably the most unmoved person in the whole room. Keitel was directed to the top table to sign Germany's final surrender. And then an astonishing thing happened.

"The eager crowd of Russian photographers could contain their enthusiasm no longer. They surged forward until they all but engulfed the top table, pushing and struggling among themselves to thrust their cameras within inches of Keitel's furious face while he signed. Reporters stood on chairs until other reporters pushed them off. It was probably the most uproarious surrender scene in history and yet the top table somehow managed to retain a calm dignity and the signings proceeded as arranged.

"Keitel returned to his former seat and began expostulating to interpreters about some detail in the surrender terms with which he did not agree. It was a small point, and, anyway, he had already signed. After a while he tried to cover his humiliation with some conversation to his aides. The signings complete, the documents were carefully stored away in blue folders, and everyone repaired to the largest ante-room for conversation and beer." ▶

Air Chief Marshal Arthur William Tedder and Field Marshal Georgy Zhukov at Karlshorst. (NARA)



The very room at Karlshorst in which the Germans surrendered to the Allies on the night of May 8/9, 1945. The furnishings are an exact reconstruction created by the Russians in 1967. (Historic Military Press)

The commemorative plaque on the front wall of what is now the German-Russian Museum at Karlshorst denotes it was the location where the German surrender was signed in May 1945. Note the T-34 that can be seen in the background. (Historic Military Press)

The time of the signing of the unconditional surrender was recorded locally as 00.16 hours on May 9. Once again there had been last minute issues, mainly around the identification and designation of the Allied signatories. After repeated redrafts, all of which needed translating and retyping, it was finally agreed that both the French and US signatures would be as witnesses. As a result, the final versions of the document were not ready for ratification until after midnight, the physical signing taking place on May 9. This was then backdated to May 8 so that the Instrument was consistent with the Reims agreement and the public announcements of the surrender already made by some leaders. Since the signing, the Western allies have taken May 8 as being VE Day, whilst Victory Day is celebrated by Russians on May 9.

A TIME OF CELEBRATION

With confirmation that peace had at last come to the blood-stained battlefields of Europe, the thoughts of many turned to celebrating this fact – and no less among those at Karlshorst. This was noted in the *Berliner Zeitung*, which reported that: "After the signing, Keitel and his companions were treated to caviar, vodka and champagne in the villa placed at their disposal. The meal differed in no respect from the Allies' banquet."

The Soviets wanted to demonstrate to the Germans that they were not the savages Hitler had made them out to be. Webb also recalled the event that followed once the signing had been completed: "A small crowd of waitresses descended on the conference room, whipped away pens, pencils, papers and all the paraphernalia of surrender, and swiftly transformed the room into a banqueting hall. And then a full five hours of eating, drinking, toasting and music."

It was not only in war-torn Berlin that celebrations began to mark the end of the war in Europe. Across the Continent the parties had already started.

NOTES:

1. Quoted in Jon E. Lewis, *World War II, The Autobiography* (Constable & Robinson, London, 2009), pp.469-71.
2. 'I Was There', *War Illustrated*, No.208, Vol. 9, 8 June 1945.
3. Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *Normandy to the Baltic* (Hutchinson, London, 1946), p.222.
4. 'I Was There', *op. cit.*

"It was probably the most uproarious surrender scene in history."

With the surrender signed, later on May 9, 1945, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder and Admiral Sir Harold M. Burroughs were taken by their Russian hosts on a tour around the battered streets of Berlin. (NARA)

The King and Queen, Princess Elizabeth, Princess Mary and Winston Churchill acknowledge the crowds that had gathered in front of Buckingham Palace on May 8, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

VICTORY IN EUROPE

At last the expected announcement was made – the war against Germany was finally over.

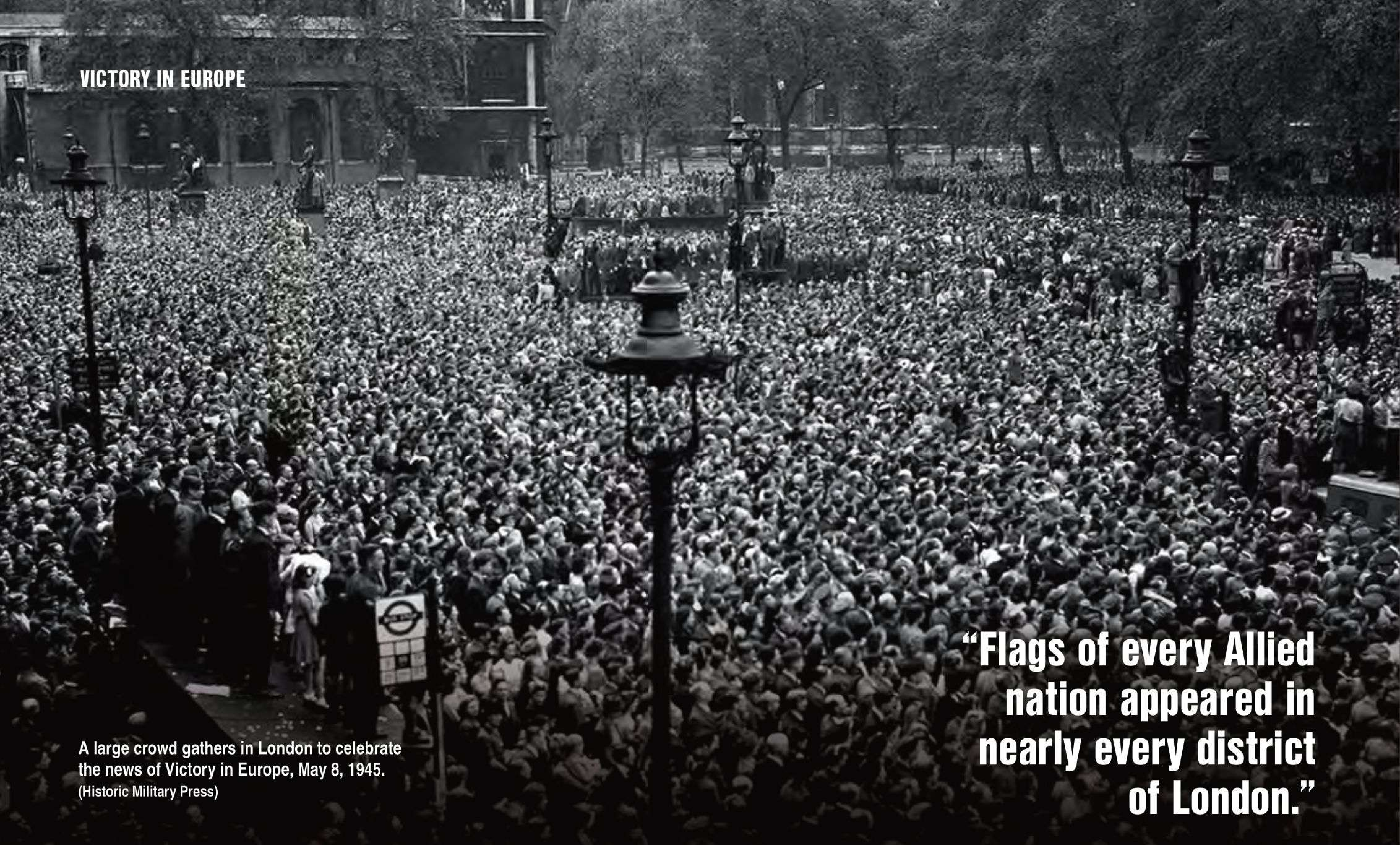
The excitement had been mounting throughout the morning of Monday, May 7, 1945. People waited in frustrated anticipation for the official announcement. "Germany's Surrender Imminent" ran the headlines of that day's *Daily Express,* fuelling the drama. "It May Be Today" declared the *Daily Mail.* Would the Germans really surrender? Was there still more fighting to be done?

Such concerns were swept aside as the day progressed and increasingly people began to believe that the war in Europe was really over – especially as word of the signing of the Instrument of Surrender at Reims began to spread. "Tens of thousands of Londoners and others were determined to celebrate the occasion, and there were remarkable scenes at Piccadilly Circus," wrote one reporter for *The Times* the following day. "Civilians and service men and women thronged the road and pavements, carrying flags and wearing paper hats. Cheering demonstrators climbed to the roofs of buses; the only people the crowd would make way for were lines of shouting, singing girls arm-in-arm with service men waving flags and yelling at the top of their voices. Cars trying to press though the crowds emerged with dozens of men and women clinging to the bonnets, the sides, and the back, and others standing on top trying to wave flags and hang on at the same time.

"A procession about a mile long, including students of the London University carrying a large flag, marched up and down the Strand last night, and then through the Admiralty Arch down the Mall to Buckingham Palace. It was a cosmopolitan crowd, including many representatives of the Allied nations, with flags, rattles, and hooters. There were singing and dancing, and outside the Palace several times voices were raised, shouting 'We want the King.'"

For those serving in the government or official positions, information was easier to come by. Elizabeth Layton, Winston Churchill's secretary, observed developments from the very heart of No.10. "It so happened that Monday, 7th May, was my night on late duty," she later wrote. "There was an atmosphere of great excitement in the office; we knew that the unconditional surrender terms had been signed. The war in Europe was not yet officially over, but everyone seemed to know that it would be tomorrow."

During her lunch break that day, Layton took in the scenes unfolding around her: "There was a good deal of shouting, cheering and singing going on. Crowds were gathering, wearing silly paper hats and blowing whistles and waving flags."[1] Despite the momentous developments, Churchill, Layton recalled, showed no sign of resting that night. Perhaps still preparing for the day ahead, it was 03.45 hours on May 8 before the Prime Minister retired for the night. ⊠



A large crowd gathers in London to celebrate the news of Victory in Europe, May 8, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

> “Flags of every Allied nation appeared in nearly every district of London.”

THE PREPARATIONS

Like Churchill, few appear to have enjoyed much sleep, as the same reporter for *The Times* also noted: “Large bonfires ringed London during the night, and most public buildings were floodlit. Tugs, motorboats, and other small craft raced up and down the Thames, sounding their sirens and blowing their hooters. Now and again an aeroplane flew low over the city, showing its navigation lights. In some places fireworks and rockets were sent up…

“At Poplar, ships’ sirens celebrated the end of the war by hooting for two hours. Large bonfires were lit on bombed sites and in the middle of the streets. Flags of every Allied nation appeared in nearly every district of London yesterday afternoon and were particularly in evidence in the most badly bombed suburbs. In many streets the Coronation flags had been saved and brought out again. There were food queues in many parts of London yesterday evening, especially outside bakers’ shops. Towards 6 o’clock, as the news of surrender was spreading rapidly, three Lancasters flew low over London dropping red and green lights.”

MP
NAZIS QUIT
326

Information regarding the German surrender is taken in by four US Army MPs as they read the news, under the headline “Germany Quits”, in a copy of *Stars and Stripes*. Such was the demand for copies, that even the presses of *The Times* in London were put to work, at 21.00 hours on May 7, 1945, to help produce copies of this special edition. (NARA)

A jubilant Pfc Melvin Weiss hugs a London resident during the celebrations that took place in Piccadilly Circus, London, as midnight on May 7, 1945, approaches. With all the licensing laws in London having been revoked for the evening, the celebrations went on well into the small hours. (NARA)

A SOBERING MESSAGE

It was a different story in Germany where the announcement of the capitulation had been broadcast on May 7 by Count Schwerin von Krasigk, the new Reich Foreign Minister. “German men and women,” he declared. “The German High Command has today, on the order of Grand Admiral Dönitz, announced the unconditional surrender of all fighting troops. After almost six years of heroic struggle and unequalled severity, the strength of Germany has succumbed to the overwhelming might of our enemies. The continuation of the war would mean only senseless bloodshed and useless devastation.

“No one should be deceived as to the severity of the conditions which our enemies will impose on the German people. We must face them squarely and soberly, without question.”[2]

William R. Wilson (right) and his brother, Corporal Jack Wilson (left), pictured reading a Victory edition of the *Star and Stripes* newspaper at Verdun, France, on VE Day. (NARA)

Though the parties had already begun across the UK, there was little rejoicing amidst the ruins of the Third Reich. "The sight of the bedraggled remnants of the defeated German Army slowly trudging towards our line of lorries was terrible," commented Nancy Wilson, a Red Cross Welfare Officer on her way to Lüneburg. "They had been disarmed and told to get home as best they could. Stumbling past, limping, bandaged, some supported by their comrades, totally broken and beaten. A terrible and amazing sight reminding me of the painting of the French Retreat from Moscow in 1812. I thought, this is history again, going by our transport windows."[3]

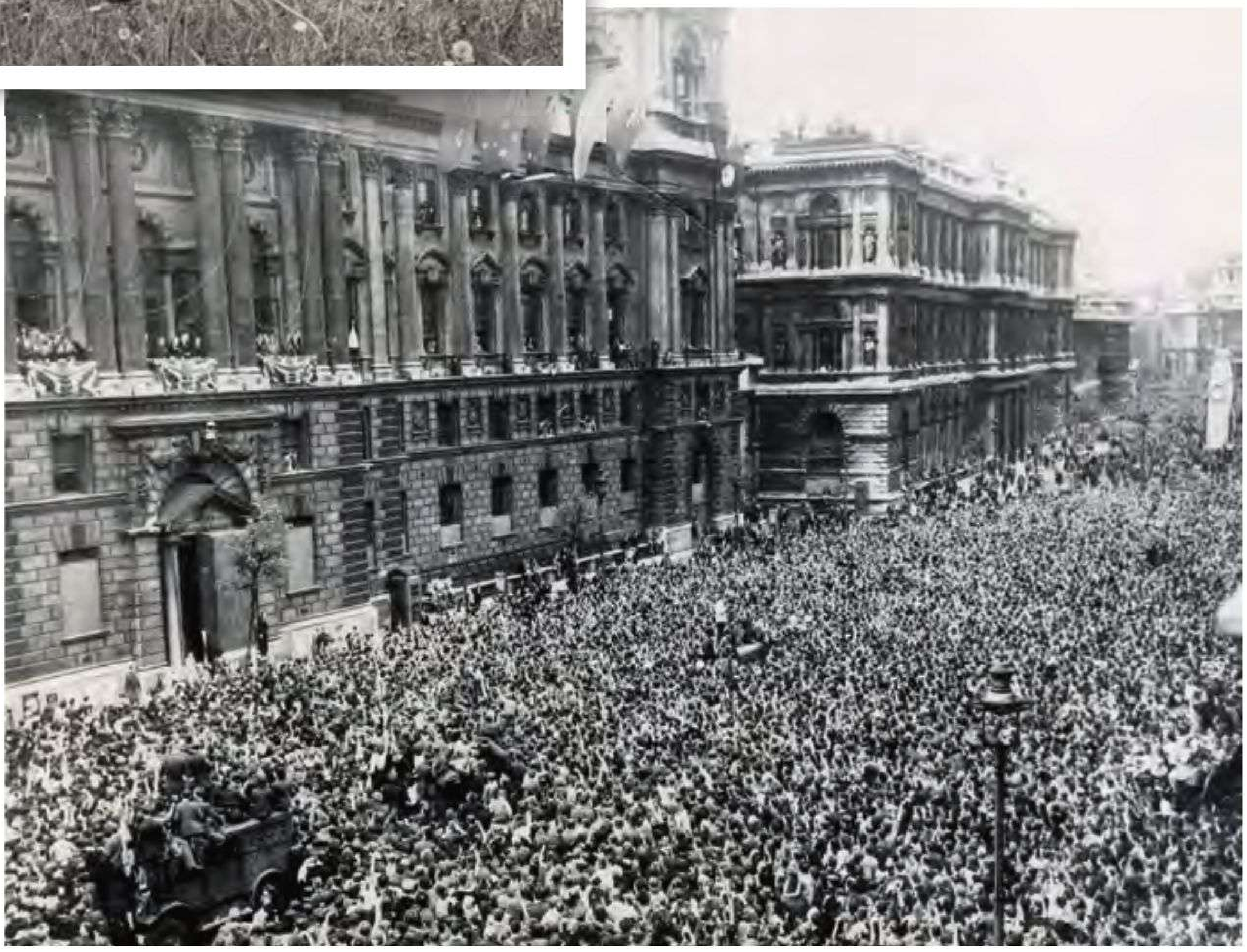
THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Back in the UK everyone was waiting for the official announcement to be made. All that people knew was that at 15.00 hours on May 8, 1945, the Prime Minister would make a statement and that May 8 and 9 would be public holidays.

John Lowry described that day to his parents: "We went down to the Palace where a crowd was beginning to form. By 12 noon there were thousands of people present. We got lunch free (we were in uniform) at a Lyons Corner House just off Piccadilly Circus. From there we walked, or rather pushed our way down to Parliament Square. By that time there must have been hundreds of thousands of people blocking all roads and squares. Flags were flying everywhere, thousands of them. We waited beside the House of Commons from 2.30 p.m."

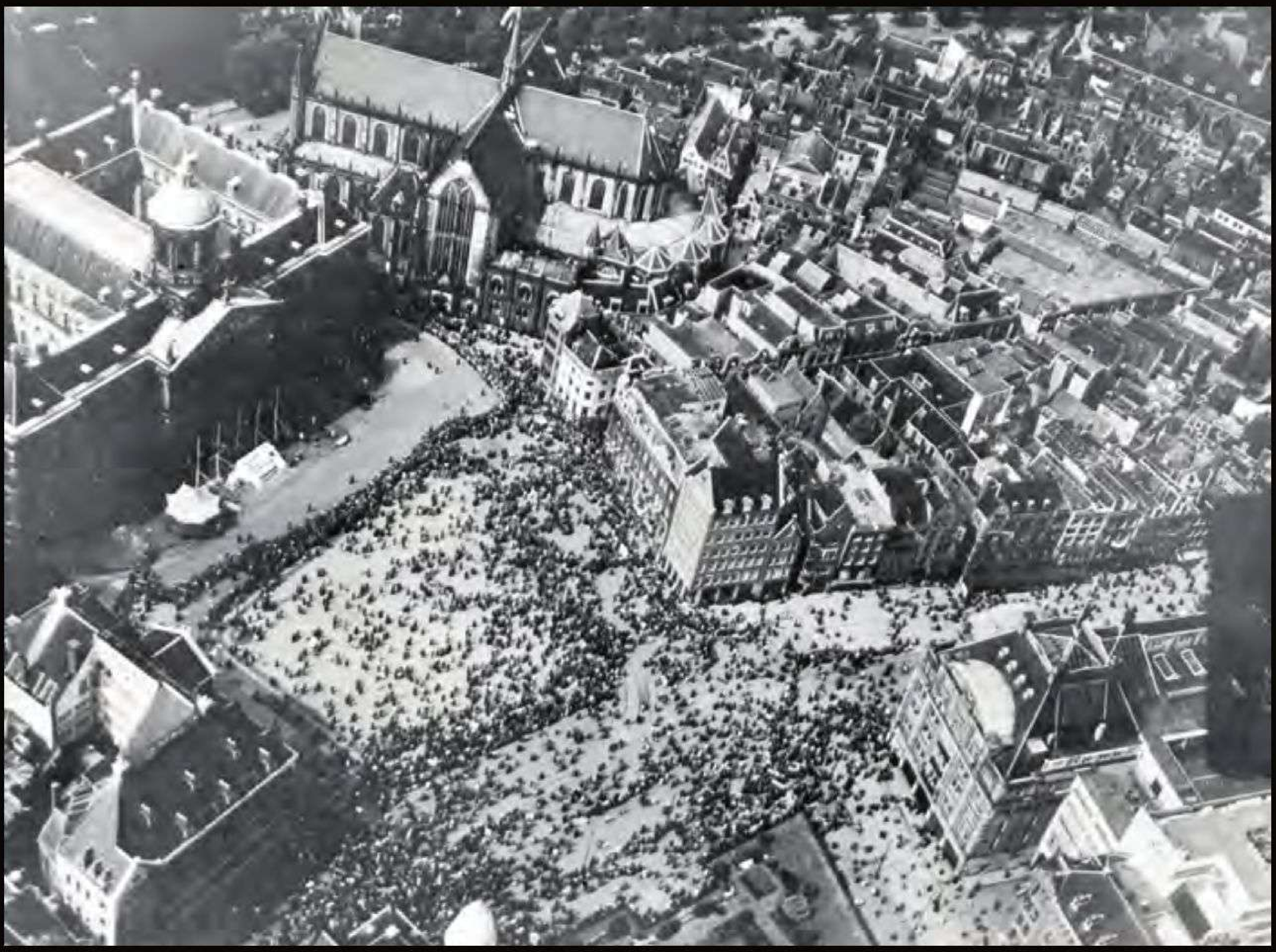
One Member of Parliament, Harold Nicholson MP, decided not to go into Westminster Palace Yard, but instead to listen to Churchill's speech through the loudspeakers that had been set up. He noted that as the moment arrived "there was an extraordinary hush over the assembled multitude". Likewise, around the country, as the clock ticked towards 15.00 hours, crowds gathered around wireless sets in breathless anticipation.

Then, as the chimes of Big Ben receded, the deep tones of a familiar voice drifted across the airwaves and out of the speakers: "Yesterday morning at 2:41 a.m. at General Eisenhower's headquarters, General Jodl, the representative of the German High Command, and Grand Admiral Doenitz, the designated head of the German State, signed the act of unconditional surrender of all German land, sea, and air forces in Europe to the Allied Expeditionary Force, and simultaneously to the Soviet High Command… Today this agreement will be ratified and confirmed at Berlin… Hostilities will end officially at one minute after midnight tonight [Tuesday, May 8], but in the interests of saving lives the 'Cease fire' began yesterday to be sounded all along the front."[4] »


This is the general scene in Whitehall on May 8, 1945. Cheers greeted the appearance of the Prime Minister and members of his Cabinet on the balcony. The crowd of thousands stretches down to the Cenotaph. (Historic Military Press)

CASTLE HOTEL
A group of soldiers and civilians celebrate Victory in Europe, by posing on a Universal Carrier in the high street of a Scottish town or village, May 8, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

After summarising the war and praising Britain's Allies, Churchill went on to remind everyone that the war was far from over: "We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing but let us not forget for a moment the toils and efforts that lie ahead. Japan, with all her treachery and greed, remains unsubdued. The injury she has inflicted upon Great Britain, the United States, and other countries, and her detestable cruelties, call for justice and retribution. We must now devote all our strength and resources to the completion of our task both at home and abroad."



The recently liberated people of Amsterdam throng the city's cathedral square to celebrate on VE Day, May 8, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

Crowds gathering in London on VE Day, The original caption states that "here in Parliament Square, under the shadow of Big Ben a flag vendor does a bustling trade". (Historic Military Press)

Later on, Churchill appeared on the balcony of the Ministry of Health building in central London and gave another, impromptu, speech. Huge, cheering crowds gathered below and he declared, "This is your victory". The crowd shouted back, "No, it's yours!"

King George VI, like Churchill, also gave a radio address. In it, he praised his subjects' endurance and called for a lasting peace. He also paid tribute to those who could not join in the celebrations, saying: "Let us remember those who will not come back… let us remember the men in all the services, and the women in all the services, who have laid down their lives. We have come to the end of our tribulation and they are not with us at the moment of our rejoicing."[5]

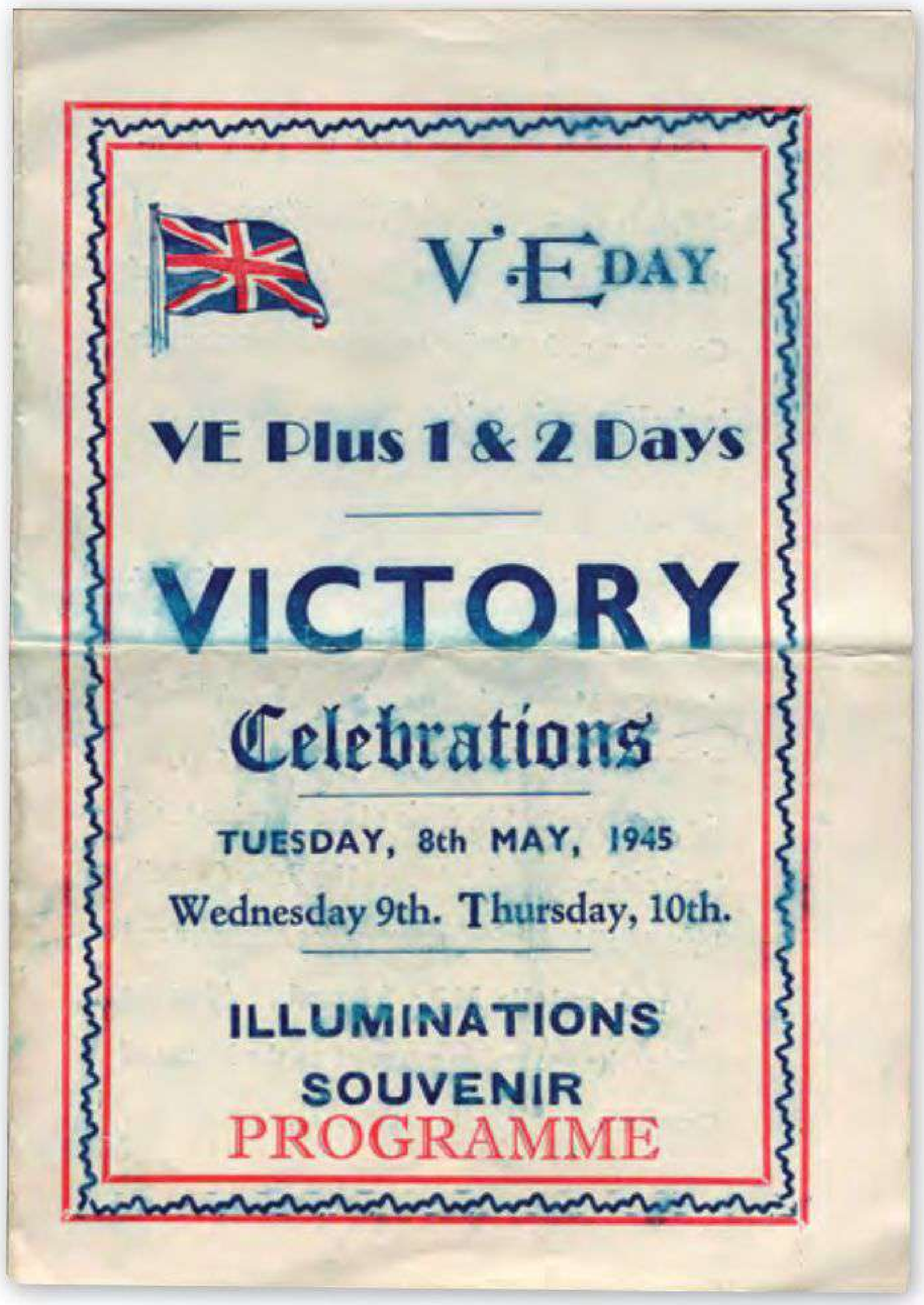
Despite the dampening effect that Churchill's and the King's concluding words must rightly have had, such considerations could be put aside for a couple of days. For now, it was time to party.

BLOWING WHISTLES AND WAVING FLAGS

To ensure that proper celebrations could be enjoyed, on the morning of the May 8 Churchill had gained assurances from the Ministry of Food that there were enough beer supplies in the capital, whilst licensing hours were extended, and dance halls

"We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing."

Well into the night, people gathered in London to celebrate the news of victory in Europe. It is believed that this image is part of a series taken in East Acton. (Historic Military Press)



V·E DAY

VE Plus 1 & 2 Days

VICTORY

Celebrations

TUESDAY, 8th MAY, 1945

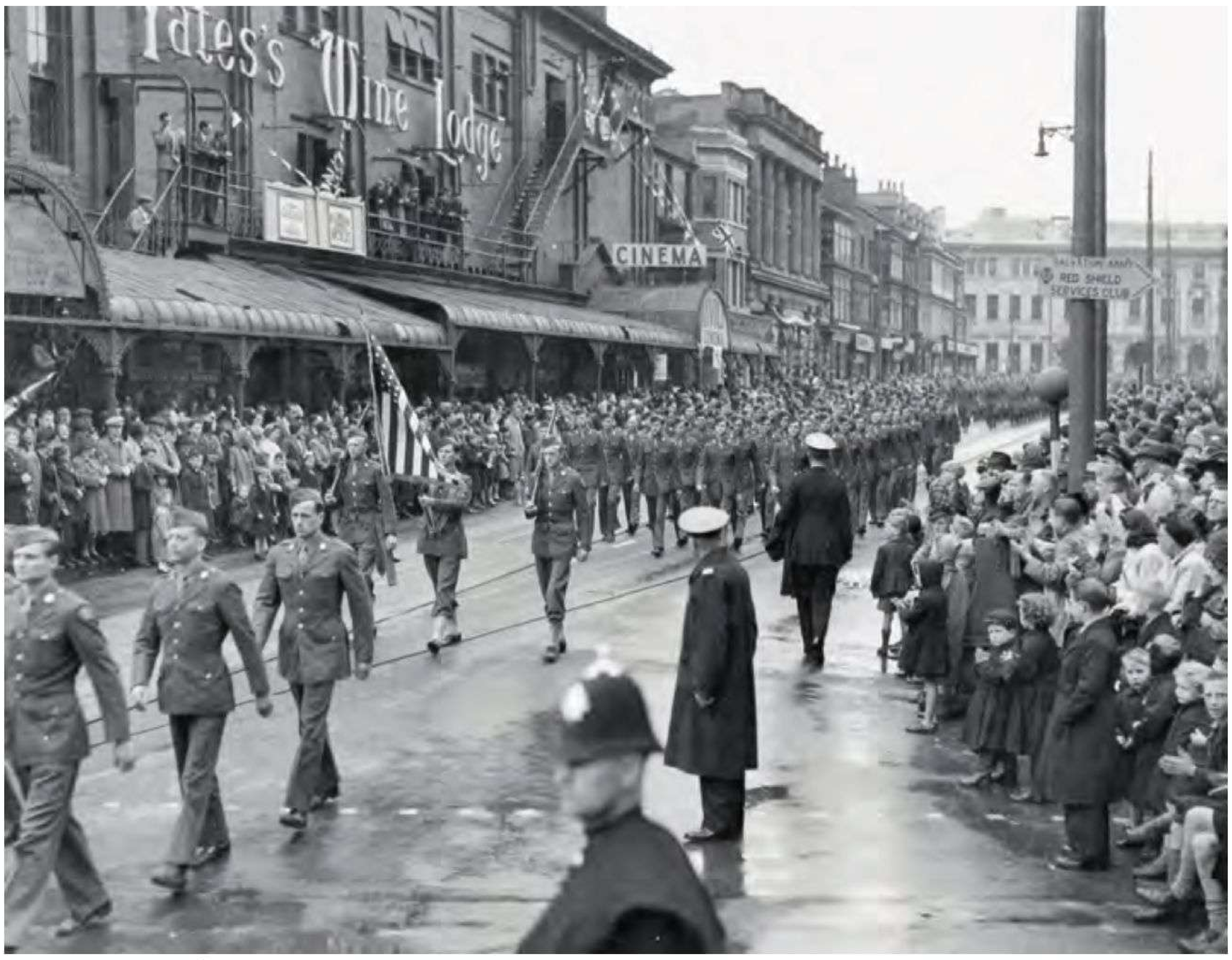
Wednesday 9th. Thursday, 10th.

ILLUMINATIONS

SOUVENIR

PROGRAMME

The front page of a programme highlighting some of the VE Day victory celebrations held in London on May 8, 9 and 10, 1945. Described as an illuminations souvenir, the second page contains details of Winston Churchill's announcement, the third page a list of the prominent buildings that were illuminated, as well as information on a searchlight display, whilst the rear page contains a message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was the Archbishop of London during the Blitz. (Historic Military Press)


Yates's Wine Lodge
CINEMA
SALVATION ARMY RED SHIELD SERVICES CLUB

Members of the USAAF participate in a victory parade in Preston, Lancashire, on VE Day, May 8, 1945. (NARA)

permitted to stay open until midnight. Likewise, the Board of Trade announced that people could purchase red, white and blue bunting without using ration coupons. There were even commemorative items hastily produced in time for the celebrations, including 'VE Day' mugs. Some restaurants had special 'victory' menus.

People rushed down to the centre of London where they knew the crowds would be gathering throughout the day. "This is IT – and we are all going nuts!" wrote a reporter from the *Daily Mirror*. "There are thousands of us in Piccadilly Circus. The police say more than 10,000 – and that's a conservative estimate."

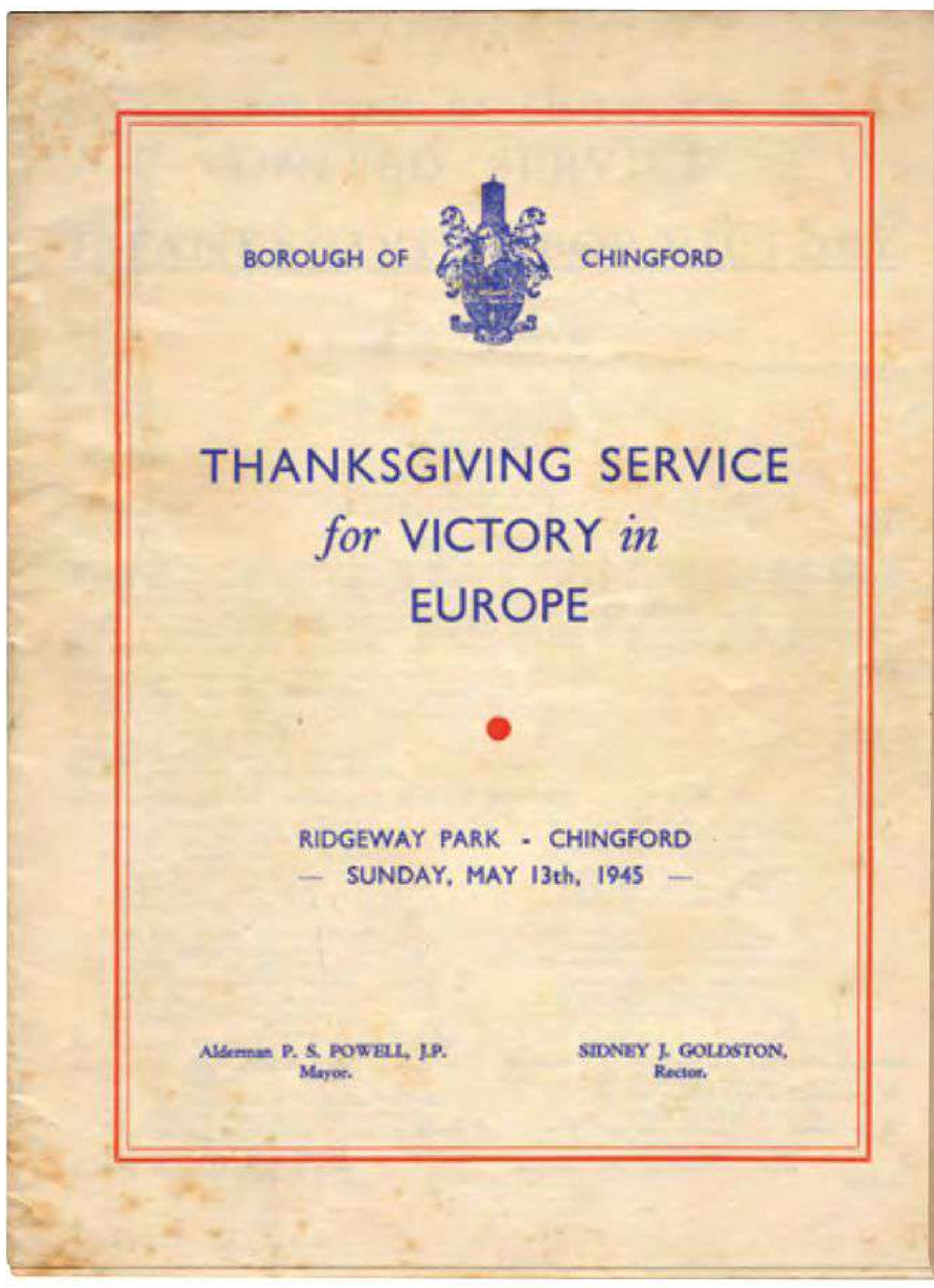
A woman living just behind St Martin-in-the-Fields was amazed with the noise outside in nearby Trafalgar Square. To her it was a surge of sound, of a great crowd of people singing and cheering: "I rushed down to Trafalgar Square, with my torch. There, an astonishing sight was vaguely visible in the darkness. The whole square was filled with people. One could just see groups of men and women, their arms linked together, whirling round and round. Others leapt about on their own in their irrepressible relief."

It was a day for all nationalities to celebrate in London, the city having been the centre of the Allied opposition to Hitler throughout the war. "The Canadians were noisy," remembered one witness, "the sailors merry, the airmen drunk (or pretended to be) and the Yanks had a girl each!"[6]

A London housewife actually cried when she heard Churchill's announcement: "I can't grasp the fact that it's all over. We've been bombed out twice, and we've got no roof over our heads, only a tarpaulin. My boy's home on leave after being away for nearly five years, but tomorrow I don't care what happens. I'm going to be really happy. I'm glad of the opportunity to relieve my pent-up feelings."[7]

A woman in one area of Cardiff recalled that they planned "the finest party the children ever remembered" at their local bomb site: "Neighbours pooled their sweet rations, and collected money, a few shillings from each family… and our grocer gave his entire stock of sweets, fruit, jellies etc. All the men in the neighbourhood spent the day clearing the sites. The church lent the tables, the milkman lent a cart for a platform and we lent our radiogram and records for the music. We all took our garden chairs for the elderly to sit on… Blackout curtains came down to make fancy dresses for the children."[8]

The *Glasgow Herald* reported that, "Hundreds of ships, warships, merchant ships, tugs, steamers, motorboats and anyone possessing a horn, hooter or an old ARP rattle opened up in the Firth of Clyde to create the most tremendous victory din likely to be heard in any part of the country. For miles around and far inland the noise was heard and people on the coast, excited by the din… suddenly defied the coast blackout ban and allowed their lights to blaze out into the streets." ▶



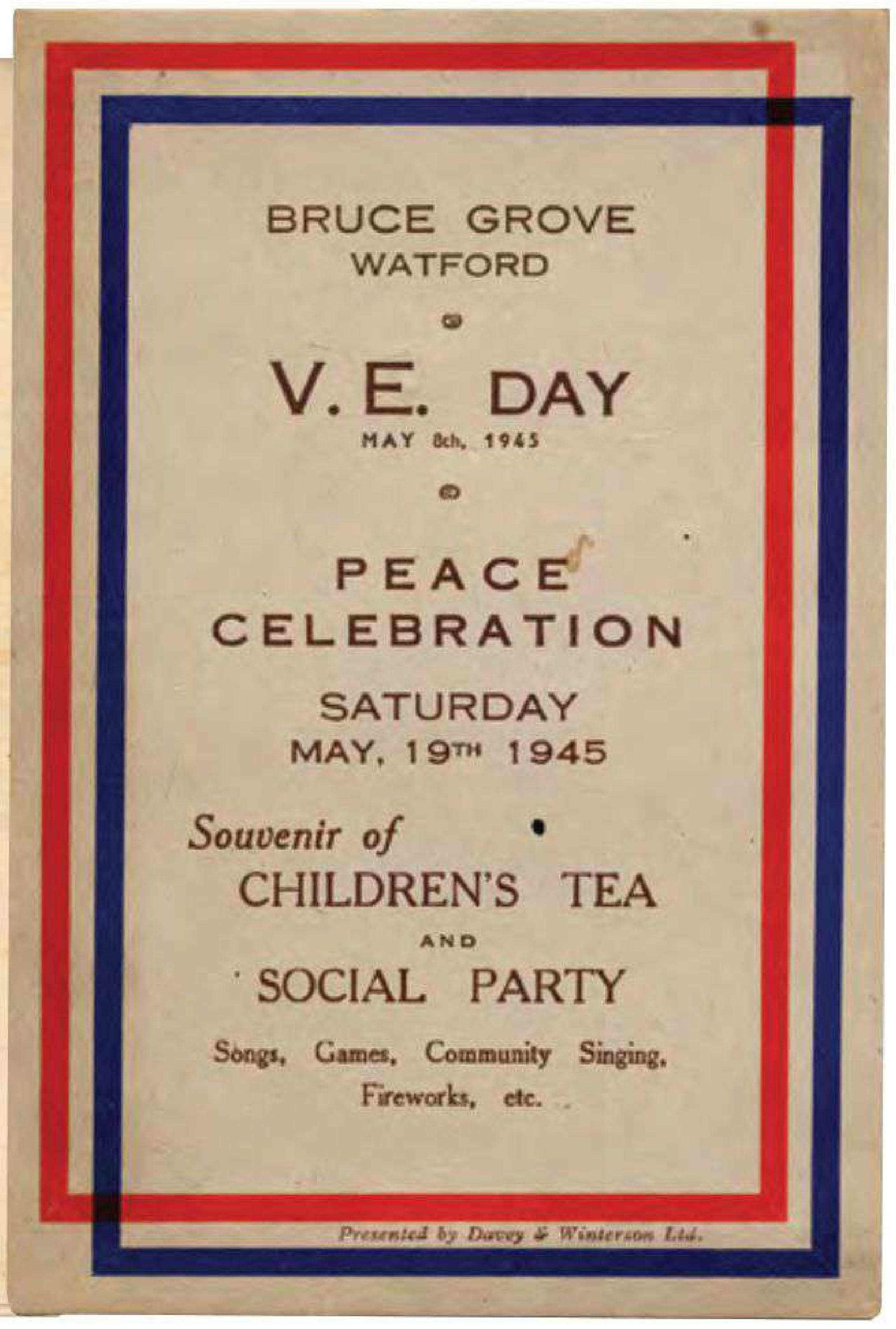
BOROUGH OF CHINGFORD

THANKSGIVING SERVICE
for VICTORY *in*
EUROPE

RIDGEWAY PARK - CHINGFORD
— SUNDAY, MAY 13th, 1945 —

Alderman P. S. POWELL, J.P.
Mayor.

SIDNEY J. GOLDSTON,
Rector.



BRUCE GROVE
WATFORD

V. E. DAY
MAY 8th, 1945

PEACE
CELEBRATION

SATURDAY
MAY, 19TH 1945

Souvenir of
CHILDREN'S TEA
AND
SOCIAL PARTY

Songs, Games, Community Singing,
Fireworks, etc.

Presented by Davey & Winterson Ltd.

For two days the country celebrated, but the reality that there was still a war to be fought was never far away. As well as the awareness that Japan still needed to be defeated, the harsh truth was that much of Britain, and indeed Europe, needed to be rebuilt – as this view of St Paul's Cathedral, illuminated during the victory celebrations and seen from a Blitz-damaged street, testifies. Ten consecutive services giving thanks for peace were held in St Paul's on VE Day, each one attended by thousands of people. (Library of Congress)

'EVERYONE KISSING EVERYONE ELSE'

Of the festivities in Leatherhead, the *Surrey Advertiser* reported that "there was scarcely a house or a cottage in the district from which a flag was not fluttering, while elaborate decorations were carried out at business premises and offices. Children carried small flags and residents sported the national colours in rosettes and paper hats. After the announcement the church bells crashed out victory peals, and open-air services were held… When dusk fell numbers of young people took part in open-air dancing, and revelry was kept up to a late hour. Impromptu bonfires blazed in many parts of the district, and could be seen on the heights around… The explosion of fireworks was heard until a late hour."

A dance had been organised in Stockton-on-Tees that night, which was duly attended by 16-year-old Frank Mees. The hall had "riotous flags draped around the hall and lights full on, everyone kissing everyone else," he remembered. "I drew the line at hairy faced sailors and stuck to the girls, making sure I went round several times. We sang, we danced, and we joined hands singing all the songs we could think of.

"Finally tipped out of there, we walked home in groups feeling as if a huge cloud had lifted off our shoulders and I must admit I never once thought of the war in the Far East still going on as we sang and danced in the streets. Each time we met a group going the other way we shared bottles and kissed all the girls, to a sixteen-year-old with raging hormones it was seventh heaven. On the Green at Norton we found a bonfire at the top of Beaconsfield Road, so all stood around that talking laughing and, in my case, more kissing. Sometime around one in the morning with the bonfire down to embers and a girl in my arms… I thought my life was made."[9]

Across the country, various events were organised to mark the occasion, including parades, thanksgiving services and street parties. Communities came together to share the moment. Here one street party is pictured underway late on VE Day. (Historic Military Press)

France saw similar scenes as those in the United Kingdom. "Paris had not waited for the official declaration of the end of the war to begin its victory celebrations, but with the sounding of sirens and salvoes of artillery, and a short broadcast by General de Gaulle this afternoon, public rejoicing is rising to fresh heights of fervour," *The Times* reported. There were, the report continued, "scenes in the beflagged streets filled with cheering people, and the processions formed more or less spontaneously, are comparable only with those of the liberation of the capital last August. Tonight, the modified black-out has been completely suppressed and all public monuments are floodlit. Paris is the City of Light again." France still celebrates May 8 each year with a public holiday, *le jour de la liberation*.

The Mansion House, home of London's Lord Mayor, was one of the buildings illuminated during VE Day and VE week – as seen here on May 8, 1945. Other locations to receive the same treatment in the capital included Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, St Paul's Cathedral, the Houses of Parliament and Nelson's Column, as well as all of the Town Halls across London. (Historic Military Press)

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The news of the ending of the war was not necessarily a joyful occasion either for everyone in the UK. Many had suffered immeasurable losses that only time would heal. "There was no reason for me to rejoice", recalled one woman. "First my husband was dead and second because the war in the Far East was still going on. Men were still at risk of being killed, like my husband was killed."

Two small girls waving their flags in the rubble of Battersea, May 8, 1945. (Library of Congress)

This reminder that the war was still far from over was echoed by those in Burma. The following report was submitted by a newspaper correspondent in Rangoon: "The reaction of the Fourteenth Army and the XV Corps to the news of VE Day in Europe was perhaps best summarized by a senior commander who, on a visit to Rangoon to-day, remarked: 'The war is not over. Let us get on with the war.' By no means all the troops have yet heard the news. Among those who have there is deep thankfulness and rejoicing.

"The thought that is uppermost in the minds of the British soldier is repatriation. At last, lie hopes, it will be possible to reduce the term of overseas service. The thought uppermost in the minds of the senior commanders is equipment, landing-craft, flame-throwers, transport, aircraft, freighters. At last we shall get the equipment we want. We have fought and won the Burma campaign on a shoestring, but the days of shoestring campaigning will soon be over. In Rangoon there were no official celebrations, but some unit commanders celebrated the occasion by issuing extra rations."[10]

Others also felt similar emotions. "Wondered how people had the heart rejoicing knowing what misery people have had and are still having and with the Japanese war – still likely to have… it certainly didn't seem like a day of joy to me," recalled one person.

Many of the men from Eastern Europe who had escaped from the Germans to fight alongside the British forces had little to celebrate. The last months of the war had seen the Germans driven out of their homelands by the Soviets, with one ruthless autocratic regime being replaced by another. For them there might be no joyous homecoming, if, indeed, they ever returned to their distant towns and villages.

VE Day was also a day for reflection. "I sat thinking about those six years," wrote Megan Ryan. "When they began, I'd been twenty, full of enthusiasm, certainties and energy of youth. I'd married, borne children, but the war had stolen from us the simple ordinary joys of a young couple shaping a shared life. As a family, too, we had been separated and now must learn to live together, overcoming the barriers set up by experiences which had not been shared."[11]

An uncertain future might have lain ahead for some, but for the many it was a time of simple, unrestrained exuberance – and that included our present Queen Elizabeth, who had just turned 19 years old. Having already made seven appearances on the balcony of Buckingham Palace on VE Day, at one point being joined by Winston Churchill, it was whilst the King and Queen were waving to the crowds for the eighth and final time that evening, that their daughters secretly mingled with the jubilant crowds below them.

The future monarch, Princess Elizabeth, and her sister Margaret had been allowed to leave the palace and take part – anonymously – in the party-like atmosphere. In 1985 the Queen recalled that momentous day: "My sister and I realised we couldn't see what the crowds were enjoying… so we asked my parents if we could go out and see for ourselves… After crossing Green Park, we stood outside and shouted, 'We want the King', and were successful in seeing my parents on the balcony, having cheated slightly because we sent a message into the house to say we were waiting outside. I think it was one of the most memorable nights of my life."[12]

NOTES:

1.Michael Paterson, *Winston Churchill: His Military Life 1895-1945* (David & Charles, London, 2005), pp.288-9.
2.Quoted in Craig Cabell and Allan Richards, *VE Day, A Day to Remember* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2015), p.189.
3.Russell Miller, *VE Day, The People's Story* (Tempus, Stroud, 2007), pp.189-90.
4. The full speech can be seen at: www.nationalchurchill-museum.org
5. See: www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-ve-day
6. Quoted from Dorothy Sheridan (Ed.), *Wartime Women – An Anthology of Women's Wartime Writing* (Mass Observation, 1937-45).
7. Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Review, London, 2005), p.663.
8. Anon, *When Peace Broke Out, Britain 1945* (HMSO, London), p.vi.
9. BBC WW2 People's War website, Article ID A2097867.
10. *The Times*, 8 May 1945.
11. Russell Miller, pp.253-4.
12. Quoted on the British Legion website: www.britishlegion.org.uk

THE LAST LIBERATIONS

The war may have officially ended on May 8, but some German garrisons did not give up their arms on that day.

The people of the Channel Islands had heard Winston Churchill's speech on May 8, which included the sweet words: "Hostilities will end officially at one minute after midnight tonight… and our dear Channel Islands are also to be freed to-day." However, it would be a number of days before a British force would come to liberate the islands.

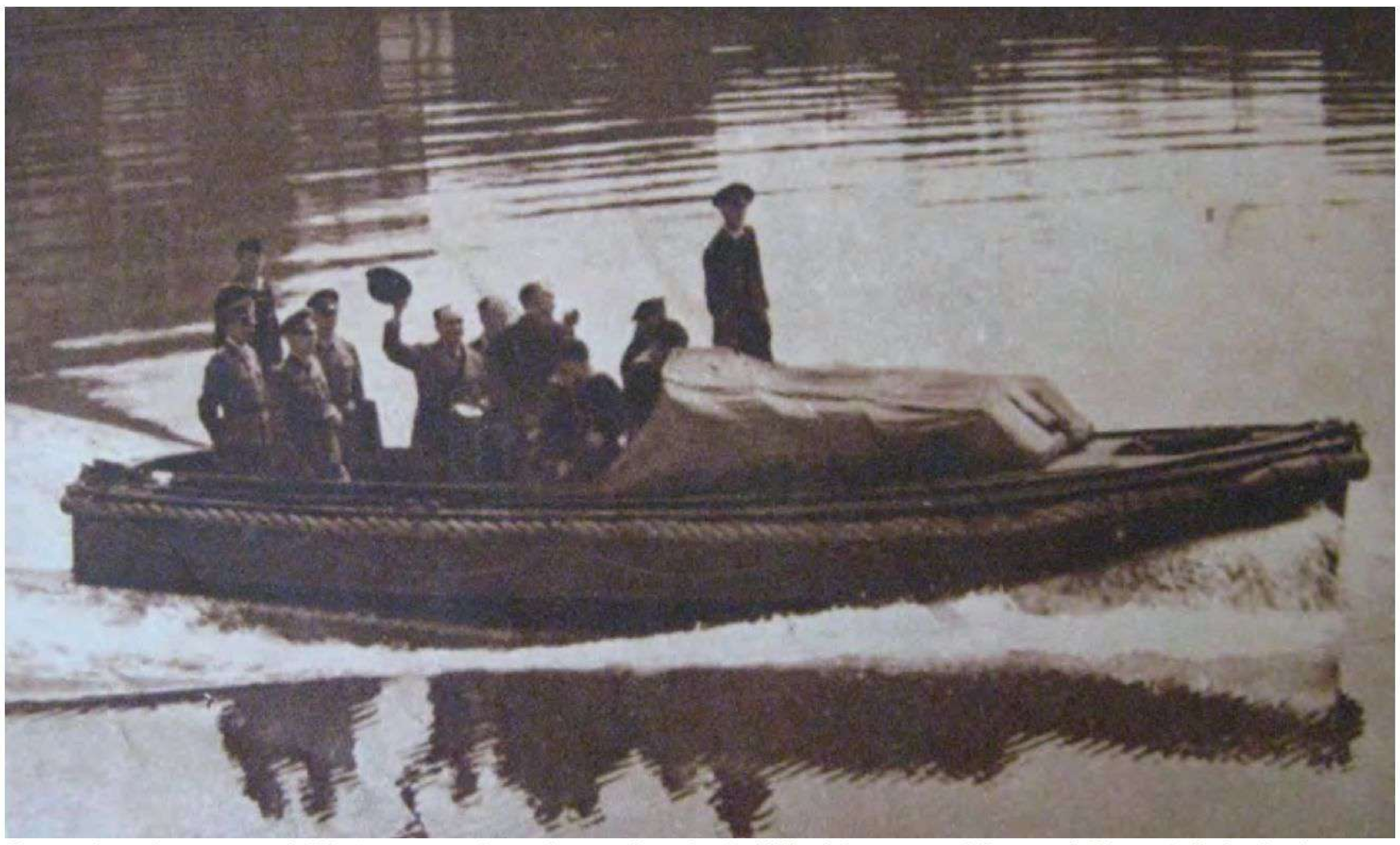
That body was Force 135, which had been established during the summer of 1944. It drew together various units, then based in the UK, and comprised a range of services; among their numbers being a good few Channel islanders. The fighting arm of Force 135 drew predominantly upon units of the Royal Artillery, whilst a vast range of support services, including the vital inclusion of the Royal Navy, rounded off the Force's overall complement.

On May 8, 1945, the units that made up Force 135 received their orders to move to their marshalling camps around Portsmouth. The main body of the Force was scheduled to arrive in the islands on May 12. In the meantime, on the morning of May 8, 1945, a small contingent of Force 135, including their Commander, Brigadier A E Snow, left for the Channel Islands aboard the destroyers HMS *Bulldog* and HMS *Beagle*. Together with the units of Force 135, this first party consisted of the team of officials responsible for negotiating the Germans' surrender, allowing the main part of Force 135 to go ashore over the following few days.[1]

Emotions on the islands were running dangerously high. Following an earlier BBC announcement that the war would end in two or three days, islanders had started to taunt the Germans, and the Bailiff of Jersey was worried that there might be trouble. On May 7, he wrote: "The position here is not clear as the Germans are still in occupation: there has been no slackening in warlike preparations on their part, for today new gun emplacements were being made in various parts of the Island… At night the Germans were at defence posts, guns were manned, and searchlights swept the seas."[2]

On May 8, when there was no change in the situation and no sign of the Germans laying down their weapons, there was a feeling of anti-climax among the expectant islanders. But following Churchill's announcement, the Bailiff hoisted the Union Flag over the Courthouse in St Helier's Royal Square to the cheers (and in some cases the tears) of the large crowd that had gathered in the Island's capital. Such emotional scenes were repeated in Guernsey.

The occupation of Jersey is almost over. On the morning of May 9, 1945, the German Harbour Protection Vessel *FK01*, with three German officers on the bridge, two Kriegsmarine and one Wehrmacht, makes its way out to the recently arrived HMS *Beagle* and the Commander of Force 135, Brigadier A E Snow. (All images courtesy of Damien Horn, owner of The Channel Islands' Military Museum)



Soon after the return of *FK01*, a motor launch carrying the Bailiff of Jersey and Crown Officers left the harbour at St. Helier and also made its way out to HMS *Beagle*. The Bailiff and the Solicitor General can be seen waving their hats repeatedly in acknowledgement, whilst Generalmajor Rudolf Wulf, the commander of the 319th Infantry Division which garrisoned the Channel Islands, and his two staff officers stood silently in the stern of the vessel. Once aboard HMS *Beagle*, Wulf signed the document of surrender on behalf of the German forces on Jersey.

ONE SURRENDER AT A TIME

Despite the celebrations across the islands, Vizeadmiral Friedrich Hüffmeier, Armed Forces Commander of the British Channel Islands and Fortress Commandant Guernsey, was still not giving up. He sent a representative in a German mine-sweeping trawler to rendezvous with *Bulldog* and *Beagle* four miles south of Les Hanois lighthouse to negotiate armistice terms but was not given authority to sign any surrender documents.

After being handed a copy of the surrender document by the commander of Force 135, Kapitänleutnant Armin Zimmerman warned the brigadier that Hüffmeier had guaranteed safe passage to HM ships as far as the rendezvous point only. If they overstayed there or tried to move closer to the islands, they would be fired on by German coastal batteries.

At around midnight on May 8, the ships of Force 135 received a communication from the Germans to the effect that they were agreeable to a meeting to discuss surrender terms. The British flotilla duly sailed back to the same southwest coast location off Guernsey where it had earlier met Zimmerman. This time it was the Kriegsmarine's minesweeper *M4613* that came out to meet the Allied warships.

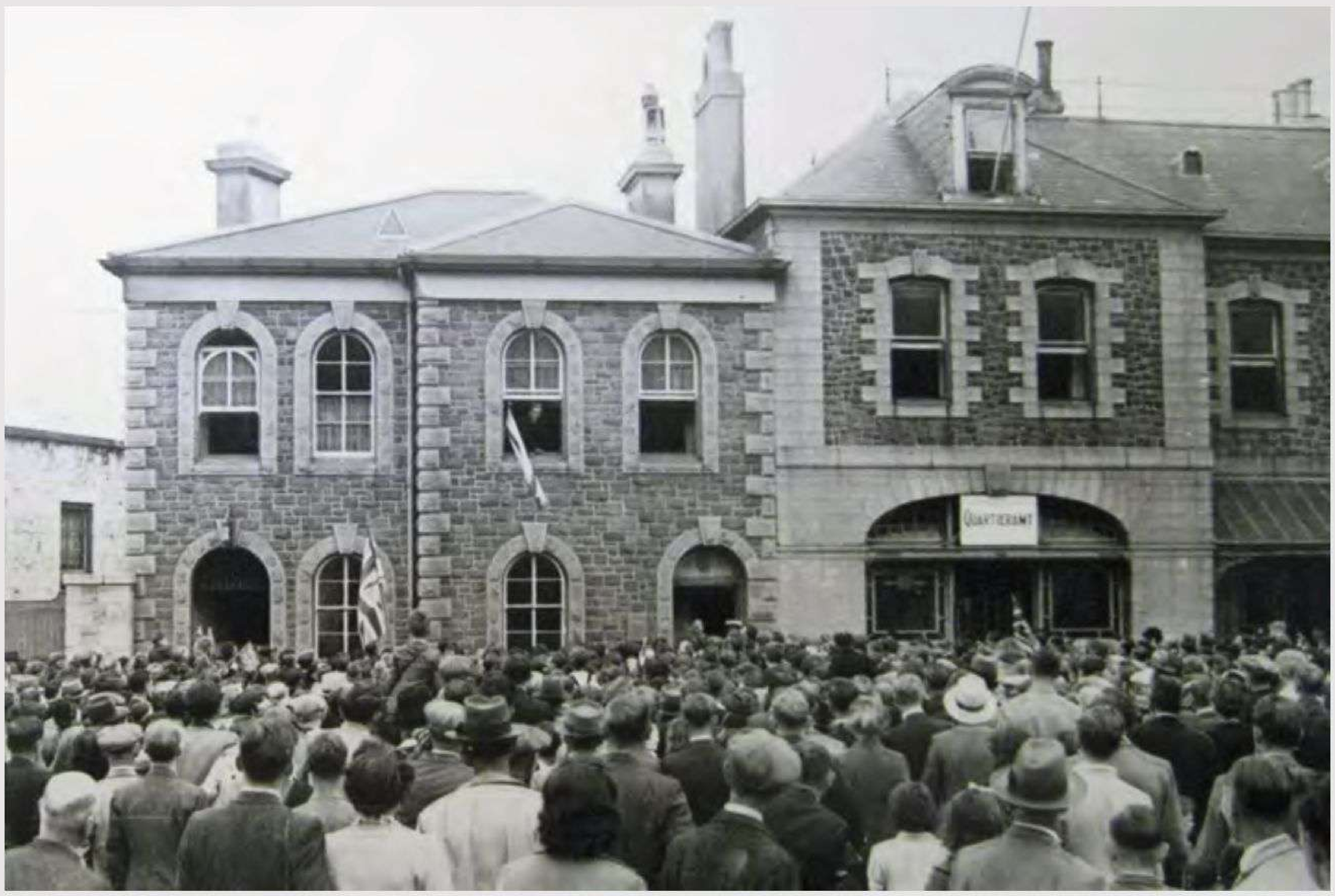
Generalmajor Siegfried Heine, the Deputy Fortress Commander, came aboard HMS *Bulldog* and was escorted to the wardroom, where he confirmed he was authorised to agree to an unconditional surrender. Eight copies of the formal terms of surrender were signed on the quarterdeck using a rum barrel as a table, before, at 07.15 hours, HMS *Bulldog* anchored off St Peter Port with the help of a German pilot.

With the surrender of Guernsey confirmed, Brigadier Snow transferred to HMS *Beagle* and sailed on to Jersey, which the destroyer reached at 10.00 hours. There, another set of surrender documents was signed. Another day passed before Sark was liberated, whilst the troops on Alderney did not surrender to Force 135 until May 16. On Wednesday, May 30, 1945, Brigadier Snow was able to report that all but 3,200 of the 27,000-strong German garrison of the Channel Islands had been removed to the United Kingdom.

ACHTUN
NICHT ANK

The first liberators ashore on Jersey were these men, Surgeon Lieutenant Ronald McDonald and Sub Lieutenant David Milne. The reception they received was overwhelming.

As the launch carrying Generalmajor Wulf made its way out to HMS *Beagle*, it passed a Royal Navy motor launch heading in the opposite direction. Despatched by the Captain of HMS *Beagle*, the launch headed into Jersey's St. Helier Harbour and made for a set of steps at the end of the Albert Pier. The moment of liberation was nigh.



The first naval officers ashore on Jersey were taken to the area known as the Weighbridge – now part of St. Helier's Liberation Place. McDonald is seen here addressing the crowd from an upstairs window of the Harbour Office. When he finished, he and Milne hung a large Union Jack from the window.

HEADS DOWN IN CASE OF SNIPERS

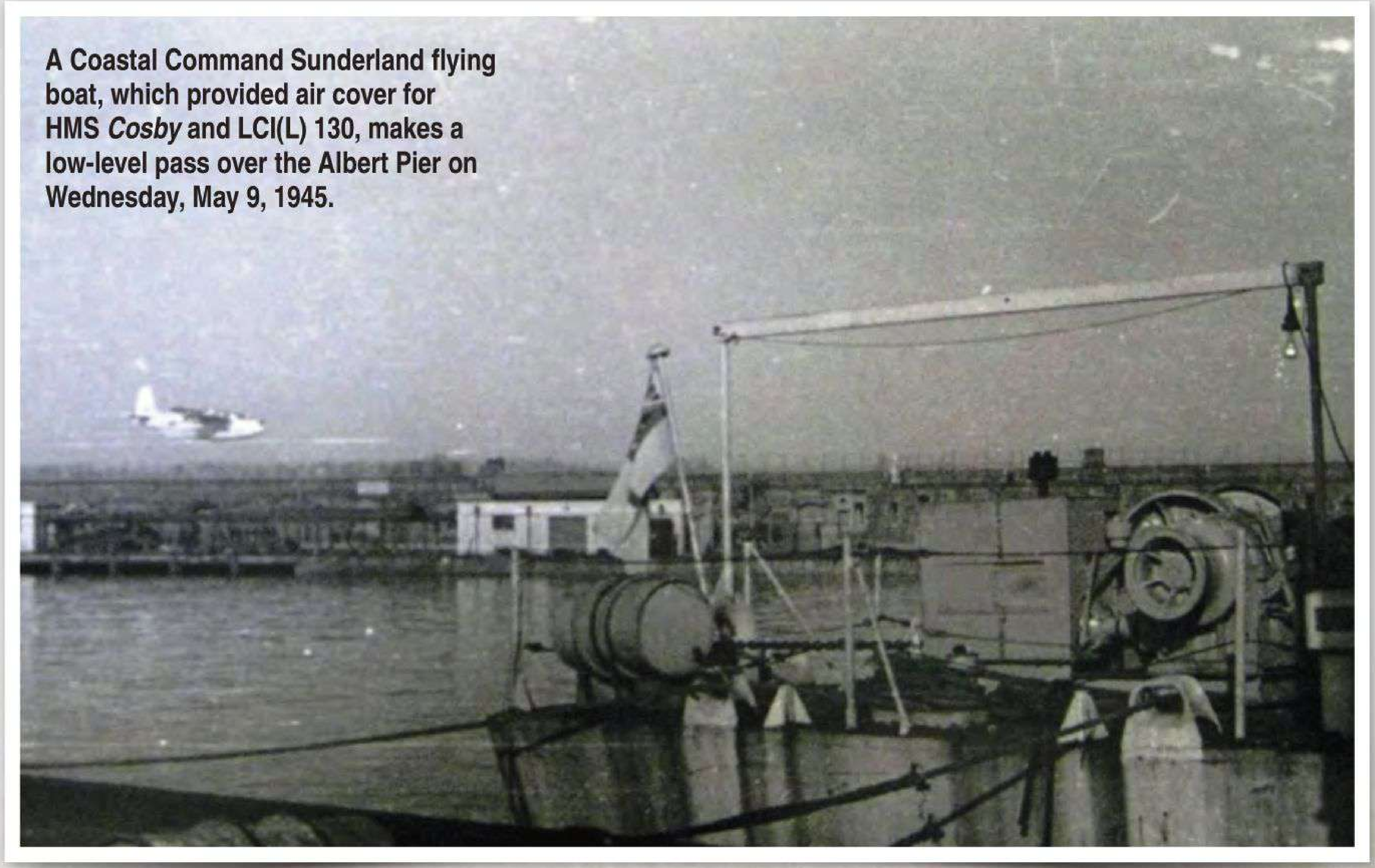
It had been five long years, but at long last British forces were about to regain control of the Channel Islands. One of those who found himself stepping ashore on Jersey was Lieutenant Noel Cashford RNVR, a Royal Navy bomb and mine disposal officer. "As darkness fell," he later recalled, "the ship's tannoy ordered 'Hands to darken ship'… The 'buzz' had got around that the German Commander was refusing to capitulate, and he and his troops were going to fight to the death.

"Everywhere on the ship troops could be seen checking and cleaning their weapons, the few exceptions being those suffering the agonies of seasickness… By midnight most of the Army officers were attempting to get some sleep, in readiness for the dawn landing, although some were checking that their troops knew their correct landing craft stations and the loading drill.

"All too quickly dawn broke. I said a prayer as we approached in the landing craft. Behind me the Royal Marines were unfolding the Polish Mine Detector and getting two reels of white tape ready to mark the area as it was cleared of mines.

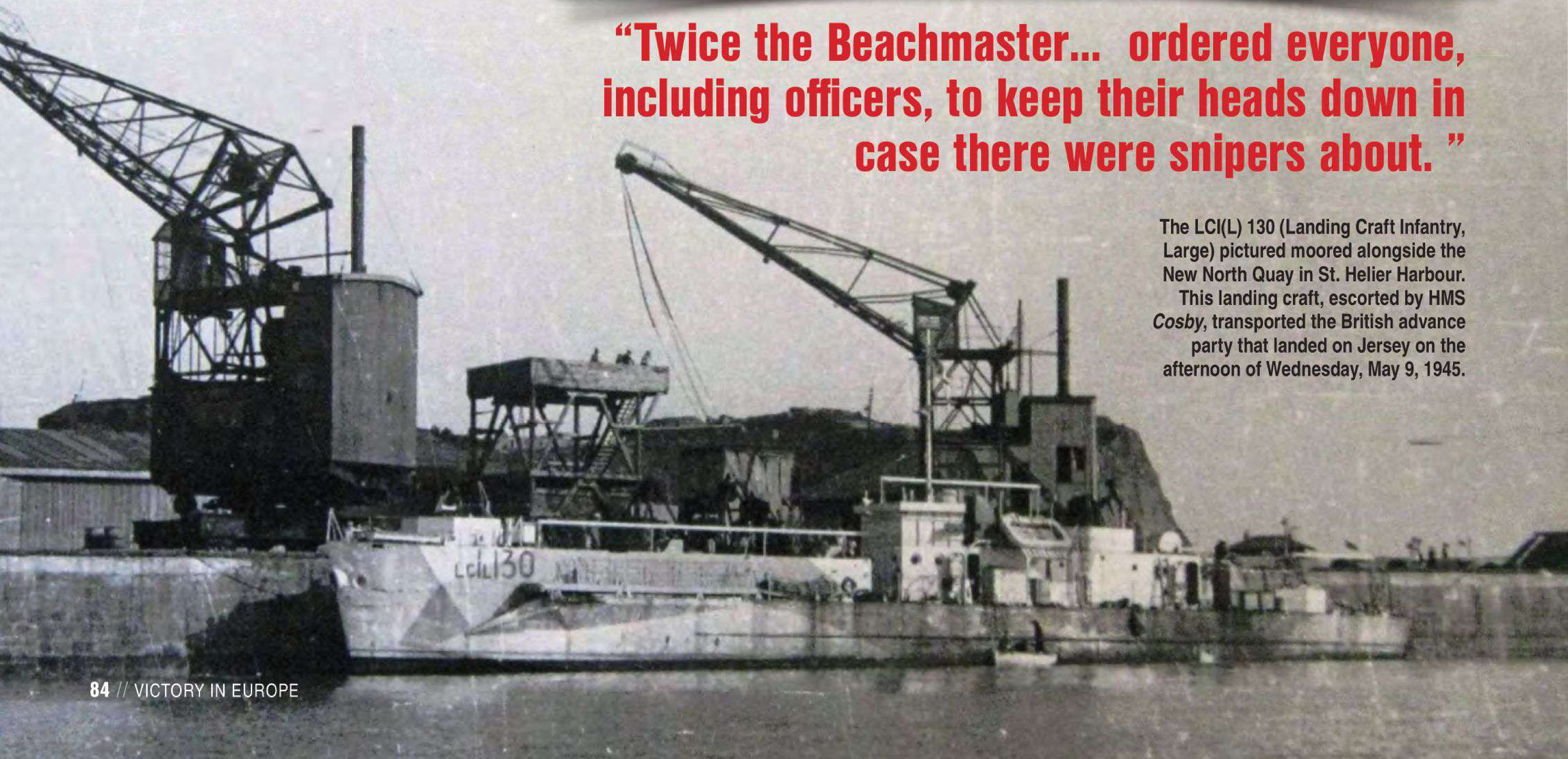
"Twice the Beachmaster, who was travelling with us, ordered everyone, including officers, to keep their heads down in case there were snipers about. A large stone breakwater came into view on our left. Thankfully, it appeared unoccupied – which was just as well because an enemy with a machinegun could have caused many casualties on our side of the craft. We turned quickly to starboard as the engine suddenly reduced speed and the blunt bow dropped a foot or so. At the same time the Beachmaster's voice came over the loudhailer 'Stand-by'. Then, almost immediately, it was followed by 'Go'.

"The landing craft touched bottom with a jerk that sent some who were unprepared sprawling and as we grounded a machinegun opened up in short bursts.

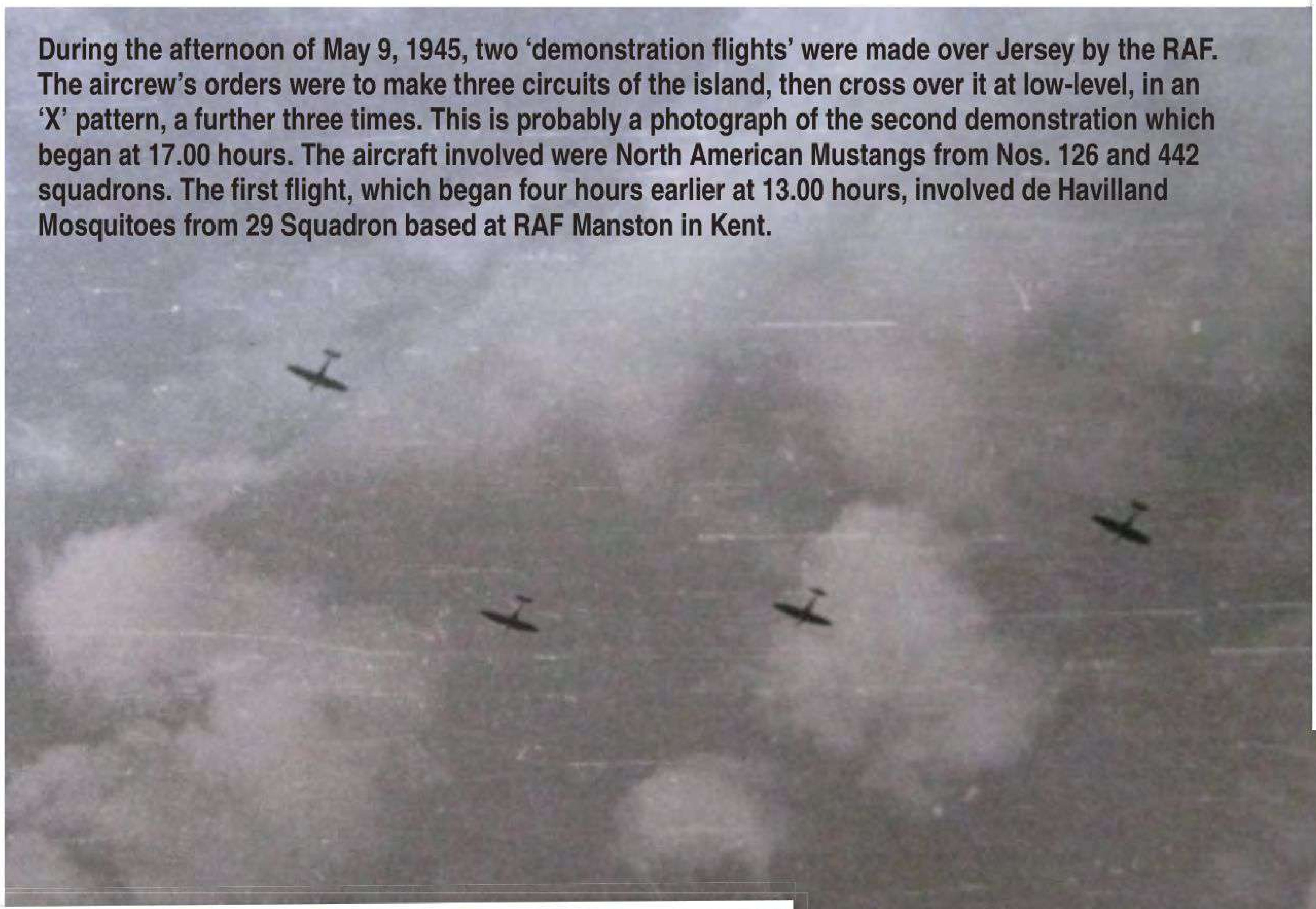


A Coastal Command Sunderland flying boat, which provided air cover for HMS *Cosby* and LCI(L) 130, makes a low-level pass over the Albert Pier on Wednesday, May 9, 1945.

"Twice the Beachmaster... ordered everyone, including officers, to keep their heads down in case there were snipers about. "



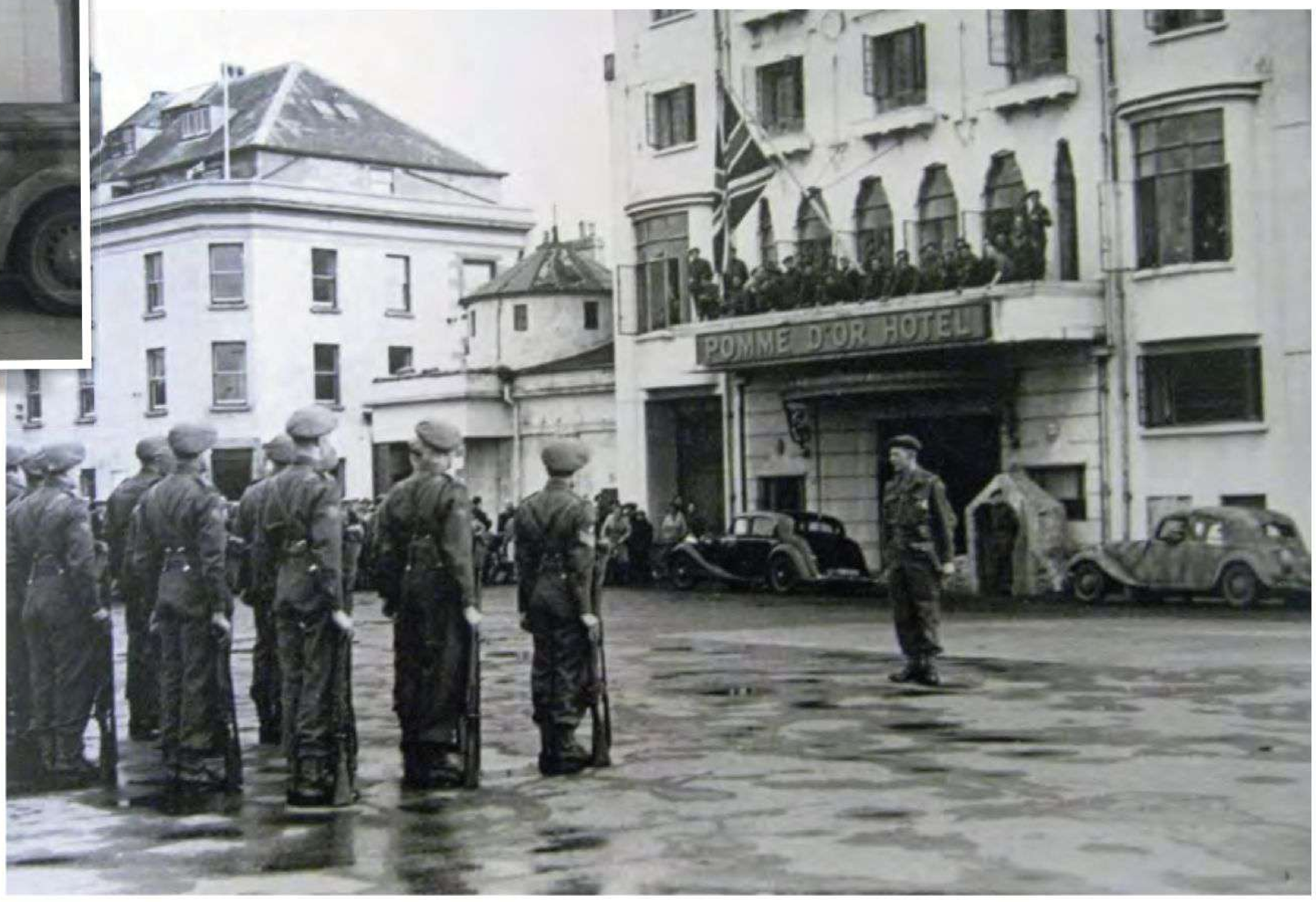
The LCI(L) 130 (Landing Craft Infantry, Large) pictured moored alongside the New North Quay in St. Helier Harbour. This landing craft, escorted by HMS *Cosby*, transported the British advance party that landed on Jersey on the afternoon of Wednesday, May 9, 1945.



During the afternoon of May 9, 1945, two 'demonstration flights' were made over Jersey by the RAF. The aircrew's orders were to make three circuits of the island, then cross over it at low-level, in an 'X' pattern, a further three times. This is probably a photograph of the second demonstration which began at 17.00 hours. The aircraft involved were North American Mustangs from Nos. 126 and 442 squadrons. The first flight, which began four hours earlier at 13.00 hours, involved de Havilland Mosquitoes from 29 Squadron based at RAF Manston in Kent.

On the morning of Thursday, May 10, 1945, a guard of honour paraded in front of a large crowd in Royal Square, St. Helier. They were to participate in a Hoisting of the Flag ceremony. As the ceremony drew to a close, the Bailiff, having finished his speech, invited Lieutenant Colonel William Robinson MC, Royal Artillery, who led the initial party that landed on May 9, 1945, to also address the people of Jersey. He is seen here doing so from the window of the Law Library.

Four members of Force 135's Royal Navy advance party photographed in front of the German bunker adjacent to the Pomme D'Or Hotel in St. Helier. Note the American War Correspondent who can be seen crouching in the background. Second from the right is Lieutenant Noel Cashford RNVR.



British troops parade in front of the Pomme D'Or Hotel in St. Helier. Note the bunker to the left of the Hotel (since demolished) and German guard post and staff car to the right of the main entrance.

The ramp dropped and I followed a much-practiced drill. Taking the earphones from the Marine, I put them on and replaced my tin hat. I took the mine detector and stepped down the ramp."[3]

As it transpired, there was no opposition from the Germans, and apart from the enormous number of mines which had been laid, the only danger the troops faced was being mobbed by the happy Channel Islanders. Clearing the mines was a perilous task which took until August to complete, with almost 65,000 being removed from Jersey alone.

The arrival of the King and Queen on Jersey six days later, on June 6, 1945, was one of the final acts in the Liberation of the Channel Islands. "Relief, gratitude, happiness had taken the place of those nightmares of the past," one islander later wrote. "Freedom from a hated foreign thraldom was ours at last, and how we appreciated it!"[4]

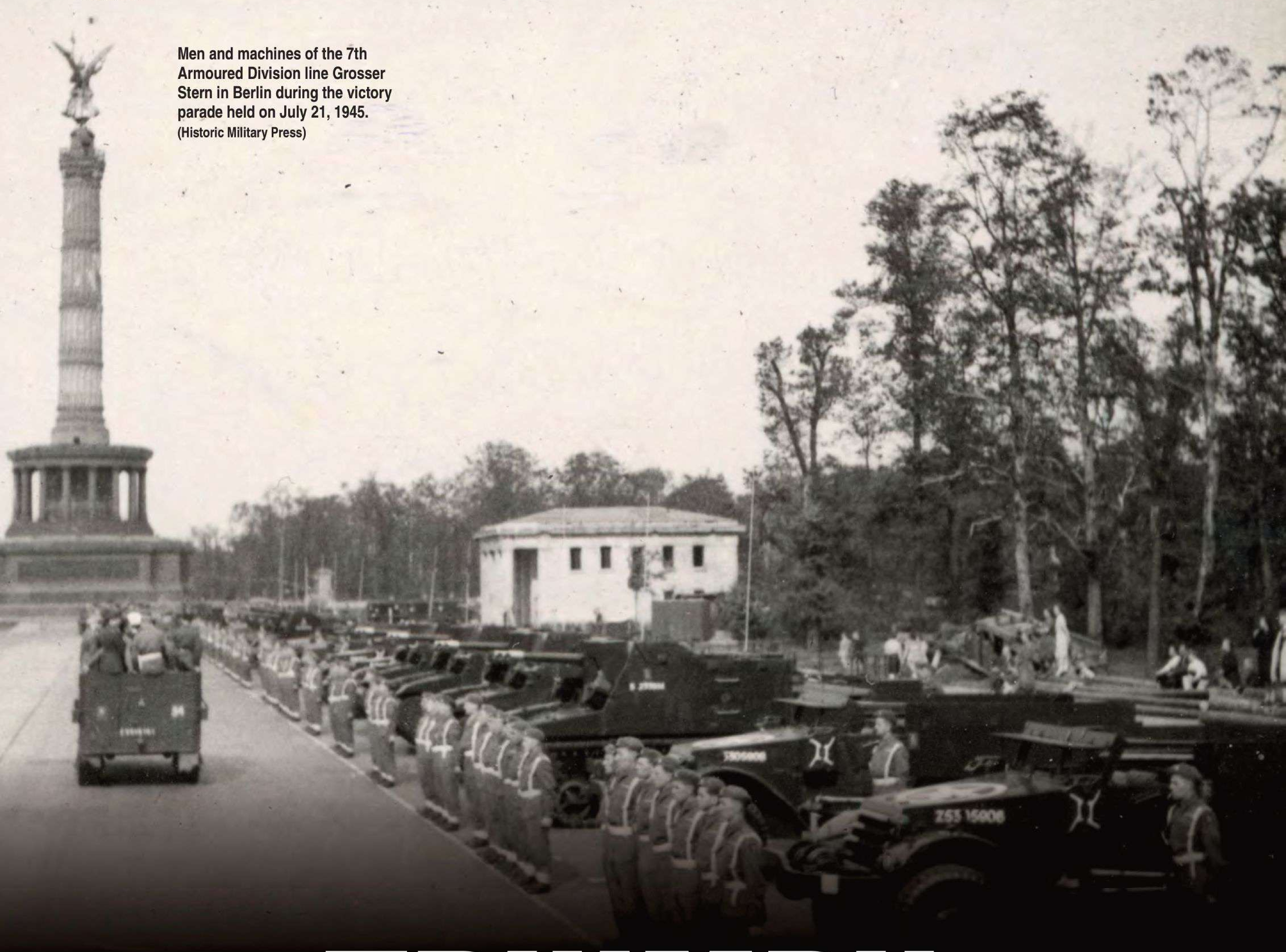
HOLDING OUT

The German troops on the Channel Islands were not the only ones who did not lay down their arms on May 8. It took an extra 24 hours for thousands of German troops trapped behind the lines in Soviet-occupied Poland to surrender. Infantrymen isolated in coastal fortifications near the port city of Danzig manned their guns for a full day before giving up to the Red Army on May 9. Stragglers from the German 4th Army, trapped in what was called the Heiligenbeil Pocket in East Prussia, also continued to resist for a full day, as did the garrisons on a number of Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. It was not until May 13, a few days after Germany's formal surrender in Berlin, that the last remnants of the German forces in Czechoslovakia stopped fighting.

At sea, *U-234,* did not strike her colours until May 14, and *U-977* remained at large until August 17. The very last German troops of all to surrender were a small detachment on Bear Island in the Arctic's Barents Sea. Having lost radio contact with their headquarters, they had received no information about the end of the war. They gave themselves up without a fight to a band of Norwegian seal hunters on September 4, 1945.

NOTES:

1. M. Lamerton, *Liberated by Force 135* (ELSP, Bradford on Avon, 2000), p.188.
2. L.P. Sinel, *The German Occupation of Jersey, A Complete Diary of Events from June 1940 to June 1945* (Jersey Evening Post, Jersey,1946), pp.286-7.
3. Lieutenant Noel Cashford, *All Mine! Memoirs of a Naval Bomb and Mine Disposal Officer* (ALD Design & Print, Sheffield, 2002), pp.66-76.
4. R C F Maugham, *Jersey Under the Jackboot* (W.H. Allen & Co, London, 1946), p.148.



Men and machines of the 7th Armoured Division line Grosser Stern in Berlin during the victory parade held on July 21, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

TRIUMPH

Though Berlin lay in ruins, the Allied armies savoured their victory in the time-honoured fashion, by marching in triumph through the streets of the defeated enemy capital.

Though Zhukov had accepted the German surrender in Berlin, and Soviet troops controlled the former Reich capital, the defeat of Germany was an Allied achievement and British and American forces eventually entered Berlin. On behalf of the British armed forces, the formal occupation of Berlin was undertaken by the men of the 7th Armoured Division – the famed Desert Rats – on July 4, 1945. The division's commander, Major General Lewis Owen Lyne, was duly made the first Military Governor of the British Zone of Berlin.

Those first British troops into Berlin were often shocked at the sight of the war-torn city – "that scarred and blackened ruin for so long the scene of Nazi pageantry" as one Desert Rat later wrote. Another of those Desert Rats, Tom Ritson, has left us an equally vivid picture of the German capital: "Berlin July 1945 beggars description. It was then two months since the Russians had stormed the city street by street in bitter fighting. No serious attempt had been made to clean it up. At least half of all the buildings had been destroyed. There was no electricity, water or drainage… the stench of the dead bodies in the ruined buildings and the corpses coming to the surface in the various lakes within the city area."[1]

The Berliners, John Allen noticed, "could be seen scurrying about amongst the rubble with their pathetic bundles of bits and pieces. They looked and acted like rats by disappearing into the manmade holes leading to the basements of the large, destroyed department stores."[2]

A large part of the population of Berlin had either perished or escaped out of the city. Those who had remained and had been able to stay in the western sectors of Berlin were often pleased to see the arrival of the British troops. Some of these people escaped the 'fine combing' of the city by the Russians by living in the damaged sewers and large drains under the streets. A large number were smoked out by the Russians, but some died in the "stinking hell of excreta and stagnant waste of their hideouts". If they did not climb out of their hides quickly enough when discovered, the Russians would throw in a hand grenade and "seal them in their tombs".

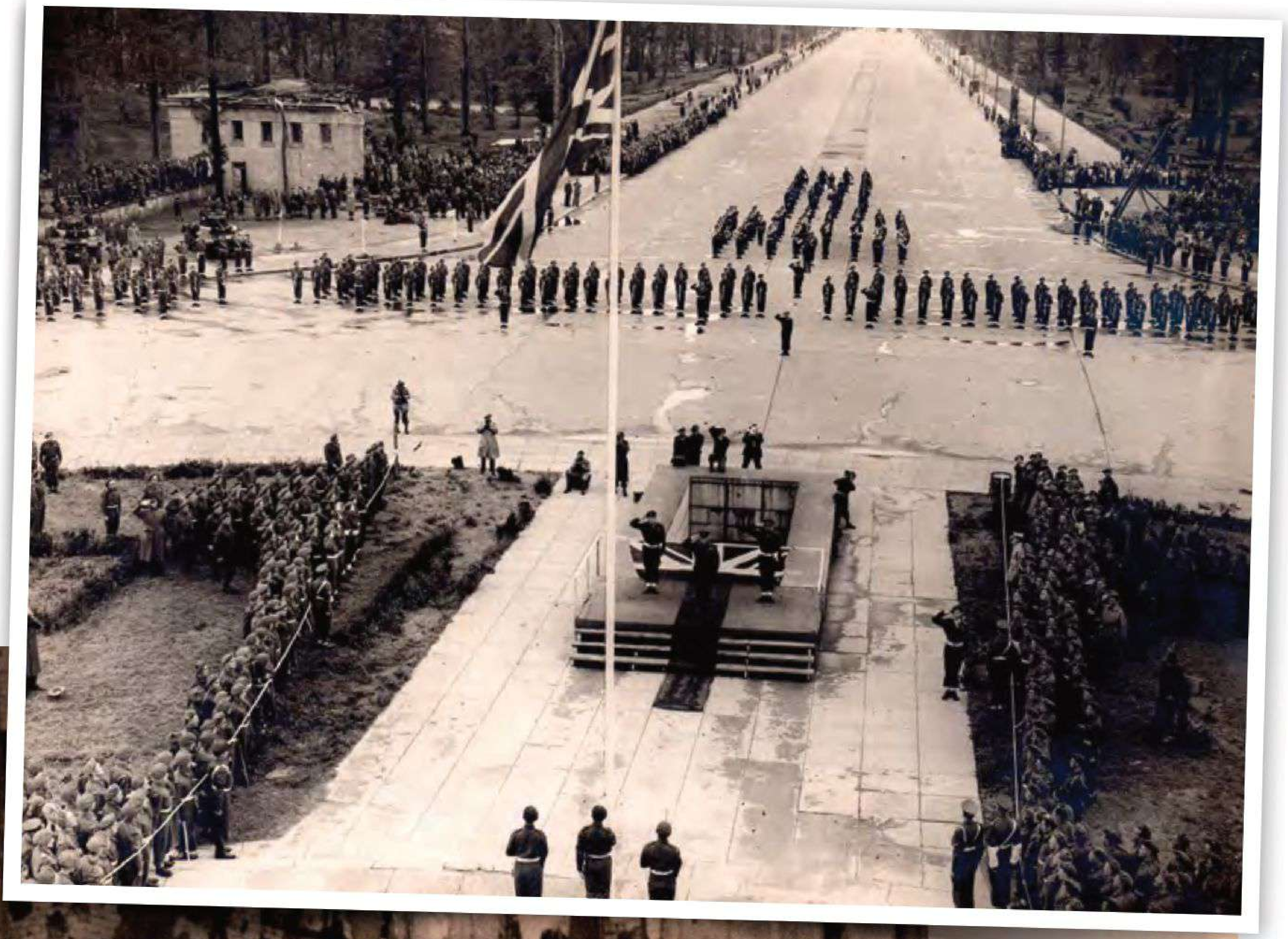
Despite the dreadful surroundings, the capture of Berlin had been the final act in the long war in Europe, and the Allies could rightly feel elated, or at least relieved, with their success. To mark this, there was a succession of parades and the organisation of these was one of Major General Lyne's first tasks among the many he had to undertake. The arrangements for the first of these was reported by the *Daily Mirror* on July 5: "The Union Flag will be hoisted over Berlin at midday tomorrow. General L.O. Lyne, Commander of the 'Desert Rats', ordered that the highest of the steel flagpoles in the Olympic Games Stadium, in British territory, should be used. The Germans objected; they said the pole could not be moved without heavy equipment. Gen Lyne ordered the burgomaster to get on with the work immediately and to have the pole in position by 9pm tonight under the threat of heavy penalties."

The Germans seemingly took the hint, as a contemporary history of the 7th Armoured Division revealed: "It was arranged that… [a parade] should be [held] on the 6th July when the Union Jack was hoisted on the biggest flagpole which could be found at the foot of the Franco-Prussian War memorial in the Grosser Stern. For the parade, one company was found from each of 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, 1/5th Queens, 2nd Devons and the Canadian Composite Battalion. They were formed up facing East on the West side of the Monument, and, after Lieutenant General Sir Ronald Weeks had inspected the parade, the Union Jack was hoisted, and the first visible sign had been given to the German people that the British troops were in occupation." Lyne took the salute on July 6 as planned, from a hastily erected platform as his division marched passed in triumph.

'THIS GLORIOUS PILGRIMAGE OF WAR'

The last of the victory parades to be held by the British in Berlin took place on July 21. Among the many dignitaries present were, from the British side, Winston Churchill, Montgomery, Field Marshal Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Field Marshal Harold Alexander, with, from the United States, General 'Hap' Arnold, General George Marshall, and President Harry Truman. Other political figures there to witness the parade were the Labour leader Clement Atlee and the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden.

The bands for the parade were provided by the Royal Marines, the 11th Hussars



The Union Flag is raised in Grosser Stern on July 6, 1945 – a view taken by Lieutenant Frank Barnes of the 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment from the Victory Column in the Tiergarten. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

Officers of the 7th Armoured Division's advance party share cigarettes with Russian officers in front of the battle-damaged Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, July 2, 1945. Lieutenant Frank Barnes, of the 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment, can be seen second from the right. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

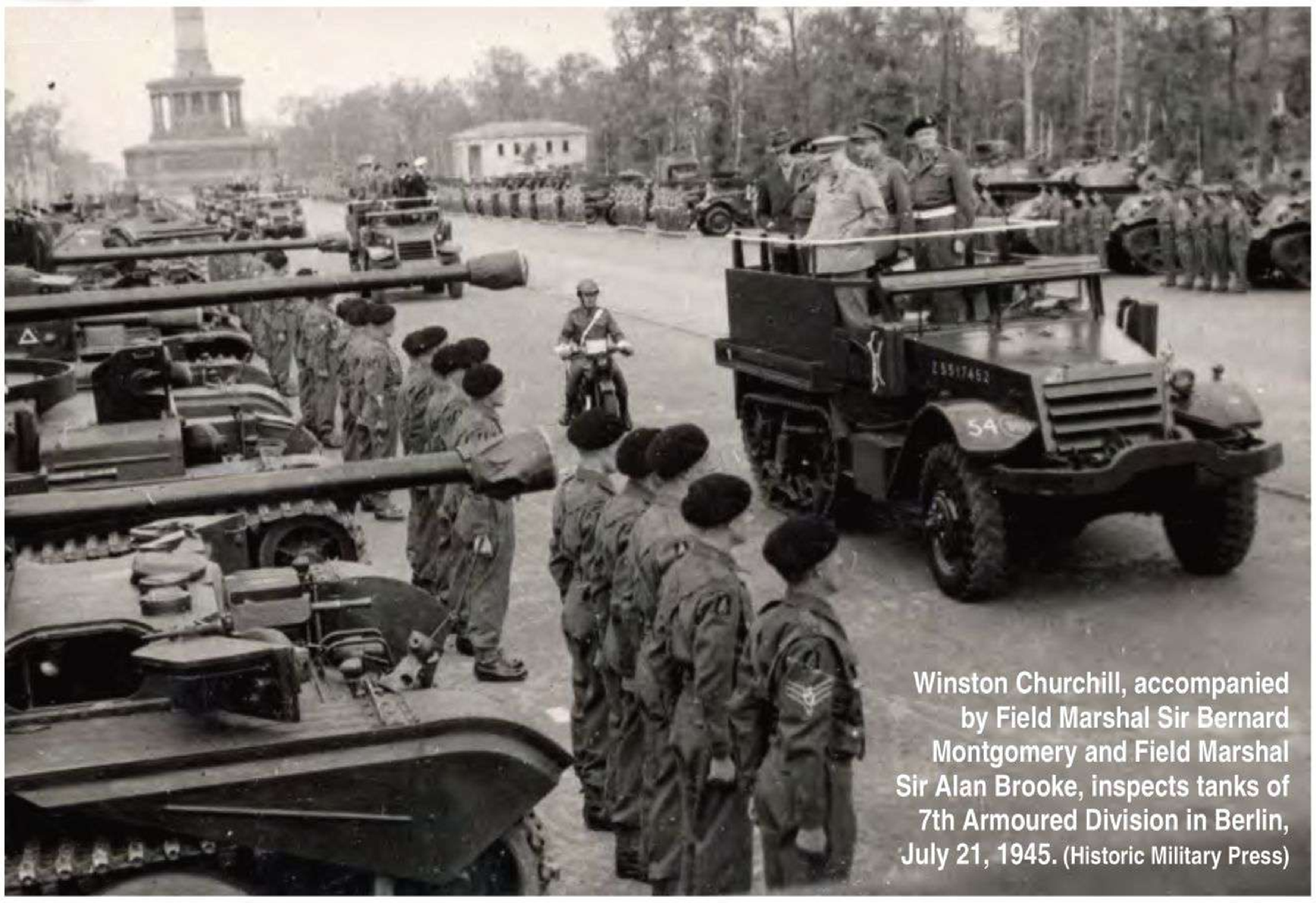
Lance Corporal J R Ware and Driver R Rose with their collection of souvenired medals and badges they had found in the ruins of the Reich Chancellery. The picture was taken on June 5, 1945, before the victory parades. (Historic Military Press)

and the 2nd Devonshire Regiment. The victory column was comprised of the 3rd and 5th Royal Horse Artillery, the 8th and 11th Hussars, the 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, 1/5th Queens Regiment, the 2nd Devonshire Regiment and representatives from the Royal Navy and RAF (the latter including men of the RAF Regiment).

The RHA led the parade, 10,000 strong, down the Charlottenburg Chausee (known since 1953 as the Straße des 17 Juni), followed by the two Hussar regiments. “As the thunder and roar of the armoured vehicles faded and died away in the distance,” remembered Ian Paterson, “twenty minutes later the battered walls echoed to the music of the bands leading the marching contingents. Their bayonets glinting in the light, the long column came swinging down the broad processional way to the old familiar and traditional tunes that have played the British Army past on ceremonial parades the world over, but never, surely, on such an occasion as this? What thoughts must have passed through the minds of the veterans as they saluted their ‘great war leader’!”

Predictably, that ‘great war leader’ could not resist one of his evocative speeches at such an auspicious event, which culminated in these stirring words for the men of the 7th Armoured Division: “Now I have only a word more to say about the Desert Rats. They were the first to begin. The 11th Hussars were in action in the desert in 1940 and ever since you have kept marching steadily forward on the long road to victory. Through so many countries and changing scenes you have fought your way. May the memory of this glorious pilgrimage of war which you have made from Alamein, via the Baltic to Berlin, never die!”[3] The 25-pounders of the 3rd RHA then fired a 19-gun salute.

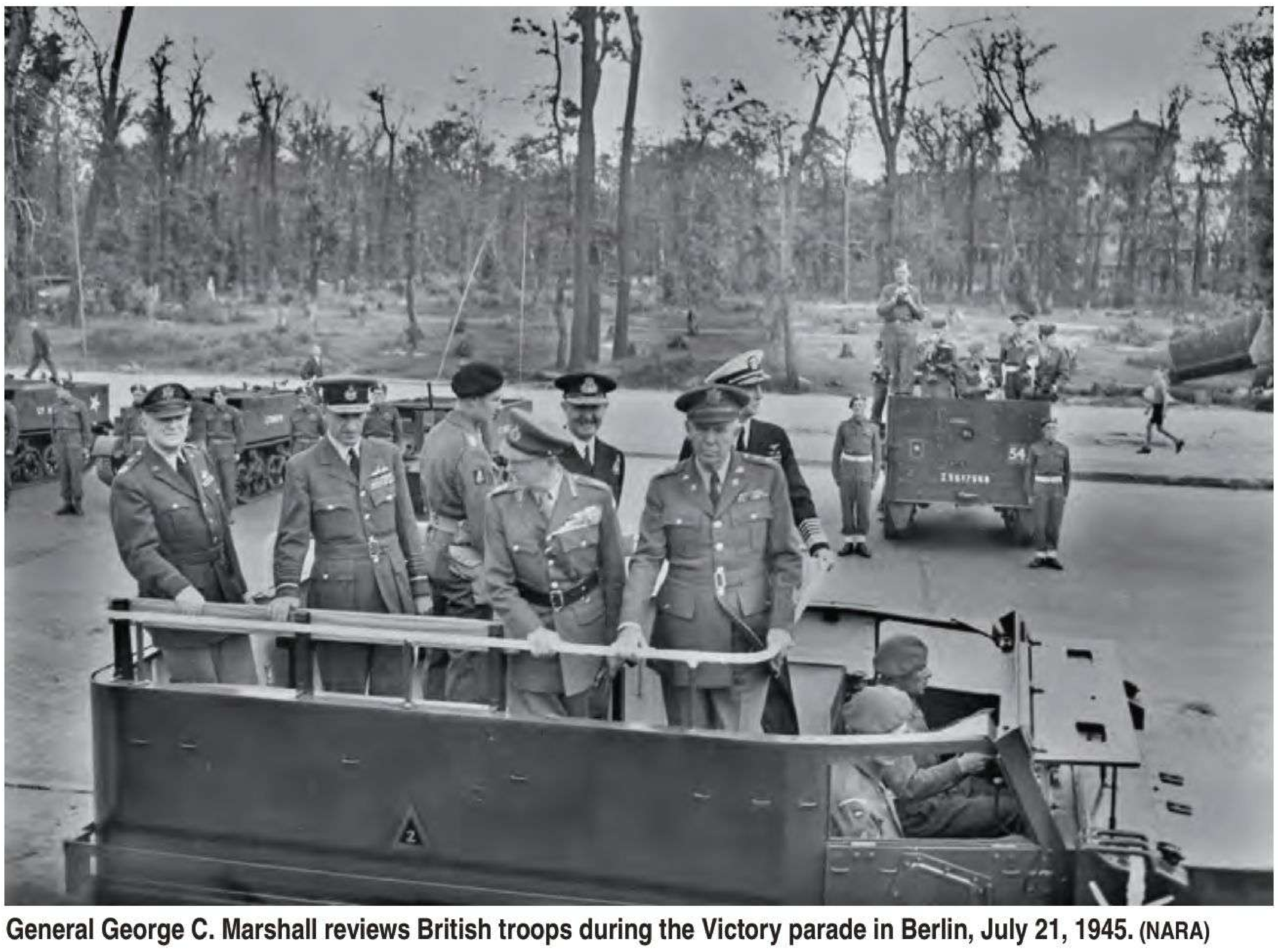
The mood among many British troops in Berlin at the time was probably accurately summed-up by Lieutenant Osborne of the 11th Hussars, who wrote in his diary: “I don’t think anybody was too festive, we were merely damn glad we had got through OK and that was all.”



Winston Churchill, accompanied by Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery and Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, inspects tanks of 7th Armoured Division in Berlin, July 21, 1945. (Historic Military Press)

“The Union Jack was hoisted, and the first visible sign… had been given that the British troops were in occupation.”

The parade on July 21, was not to be the last such event. On September 7 an inter-Allied victory parade took place in Berlin, in which troops from Britain, America, France and the Soviet Union took part. There would be few other such meetings of East and West in the months to come, with communism and democracy facing each other across what would become an increasingly partitioned Berlin and a divided Germany.



General George C. Marshall reviews British troops during the Victory parade in Berlin, July 21, 1945. (NARA)

As for Winston Churchill, his speech on July 21 was one of the last public addresses of his premiership. Just a few days later it was confirmed that he had been voted out of office in the general election that had been held earlier in the month, to be replaced by the man who stood next to him that day, Clem Atlee. The magnificent war leader was not the man wanted by the people of Britain to lead them in peace.

NOTES:

1. P. Delaforce. *Churchill’s Desert Rats: From Normandy to Berlin with the 7th Armoured Division* (Chancellor Press, London, 1999) p.190.
2. The testimony of John Allen was recorded by Devon Library and Information Services: www.devon.gov.uk/localstudies
3. Delaforce, *op cit*, pp-194-195.

A BEATEN NATION

After the First World War, the harsh terms imposed on Germany at Versailles led to enormous economic and social problems which gave rise to the Nazi Party. How the Germans would be treated in 1945 would determine the future stability of Europe.

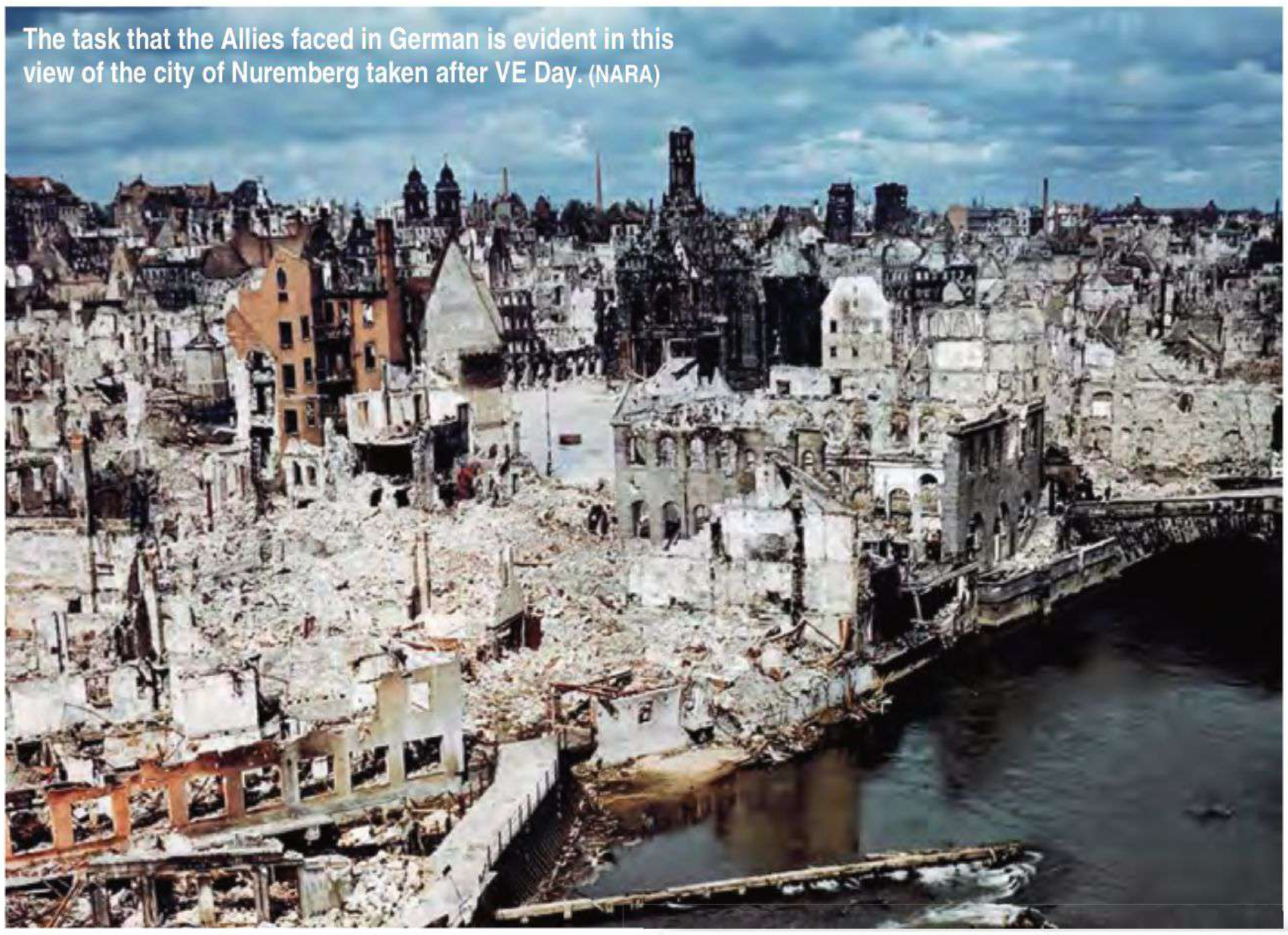
The shocking scenes of destruction in Berlin witnessed by the men of the Desert Rats also greeted the eyes of British administrators, diplomats and journalists, when they first arrived in Germany. Major General Alec Bishop, chief of information services and public relations of the Control Commission in Germany, described the state the country was in: "It is very difficult for anyone who did not see the situation in Germany when the war came to an end to realise what it was like. The first impression was of the appalling destruction which had been caused by the Allies' bombing. Very few towns had escaped wide-spread destruction. In some of the Ruhr towns such as Duisburg, over eighty per cent of the buildings had been reduced to rubble, under which lay the bodies of thousands of casualties."[1]

General Gerald Templer also wrote of the complete breakdown of society: "Military Government was met by chaos. A team of four officers and six other ranks would be confronted by an area of many square miles. There was no local authority whatever with whom to deal. Devastation was often on a prodigious scale. There were no communications, no power. Fields were deserted. Crops and cattle had been left unattended. Half the population had been evacuated. Those that remained were stunned and cowed. Everything was at a standstill."

Montgomery, who had just been appointed Military Governor and Commander in Chief of the British armed forces in Germany, wrote of the situation with which he was confronted in his memoirs: "The immediate problem that now faced us was terrific. We had in our area nearly one and a half million German prisoners of war. There were a further one million German wounded, without medical supplies, and in particular with a shortage of bandages and no anaesthetics. In addition, there were about one million civilian refugees who had fled into our area from the advancing Russians; these and 'Displaced Persons' were roaming about the country, often looting as they went.

"Transportation and communication services had ceased to function. Agriculture and industry were largely at a standstill. Food was scarce and there was a serious risk of famine and disease during the coming months. And to crown it all there was no central government in being, and the machinery whereby a central government could function no longer existed. Here was a pretty pickle. I was a soldier and I had not been trained to handle anything of this nature."[2]

A defeated nation on the move. German troops on their horse-drawn transport pass a group of displaced persons or refugees. (Dutch National Archives)



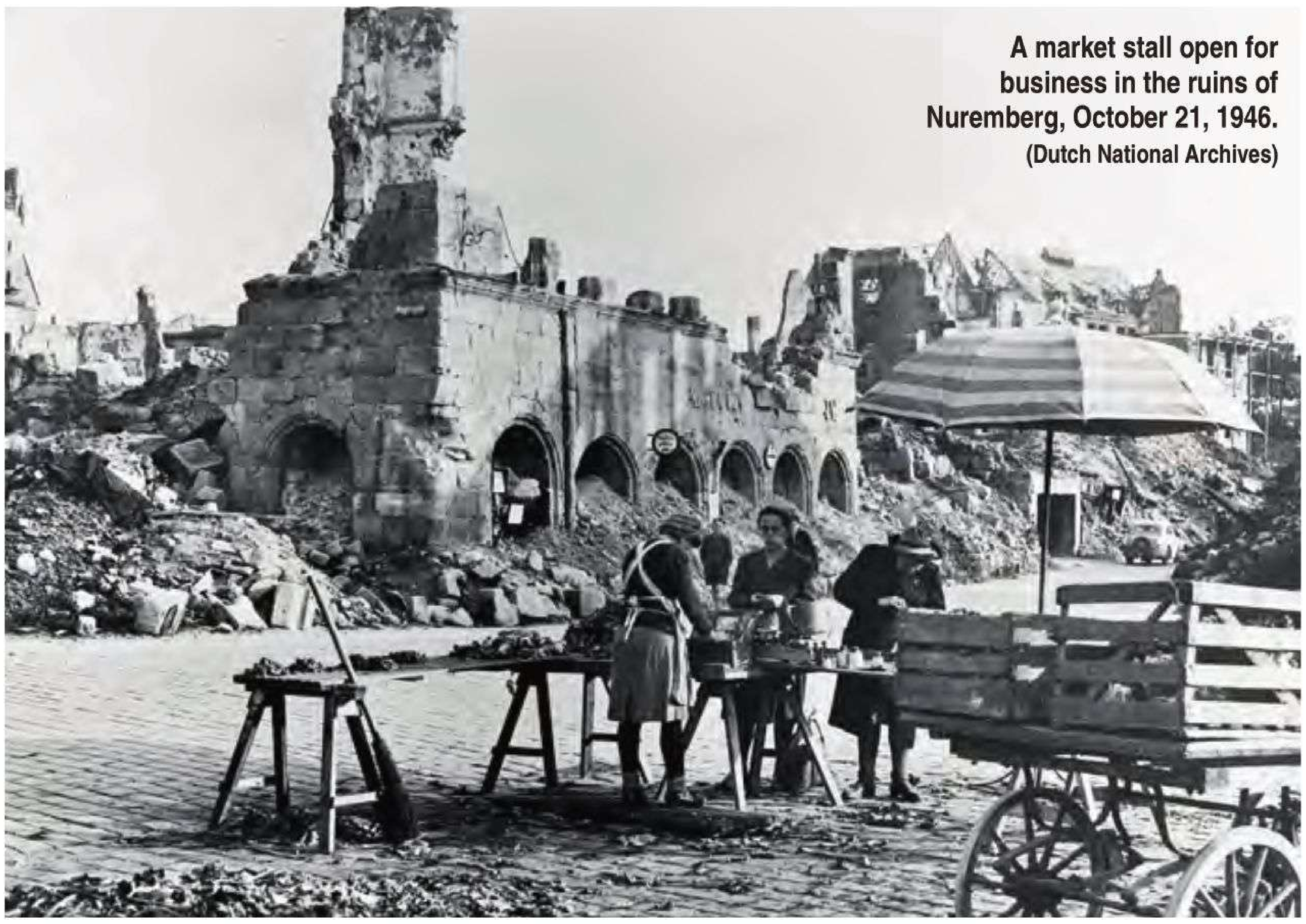
The task that the Allies faced in German is evident in this view of the city of Nuremberg taken after VE Day. (NARA)

THE BATTLE OF THE WINTER

The initial view taken by the Allies was that the Germans still had to be treated as enemies, even though the war was at an end. British troops were instructed to "keep clear of Germans, man, woman, and child" and not to "walk out with them, or shake hands, or visit their homes, or make them gifts, or take gifts from them. You must not play games with them or share any social event with them. In short you must not fraternise with Germans at all." It was also made clear at first that all Germans should be held responsible for the war crimes that had been committed, including whatever horrors had been perpetrated in the concentration camps.

But it quickly became apparent that Germany was a beaten nation, both in military and physical terms as well as in spirit, and was no longer a dangerous foe. The then Major General, later Lieutenant General, Brian Robertson, Montgomery's Chief of Staff and Deputy Military Governor of the British Occupation Zone, quickly realised that a different approach was needed: "Very soon I could see that the assumptions on which our policy had been based were false, and that the objectives chosen were quite irrelevant. The real menace for the future of Europe and to world peace was not Germany, but Russia. The immediate objective was not to batter Germany down – she was sprawling in the dust already – but to build her up and to do so wisely. We had to save Germany physically from starvation, squalor and penury, spiritually from despair and Communism."[3]

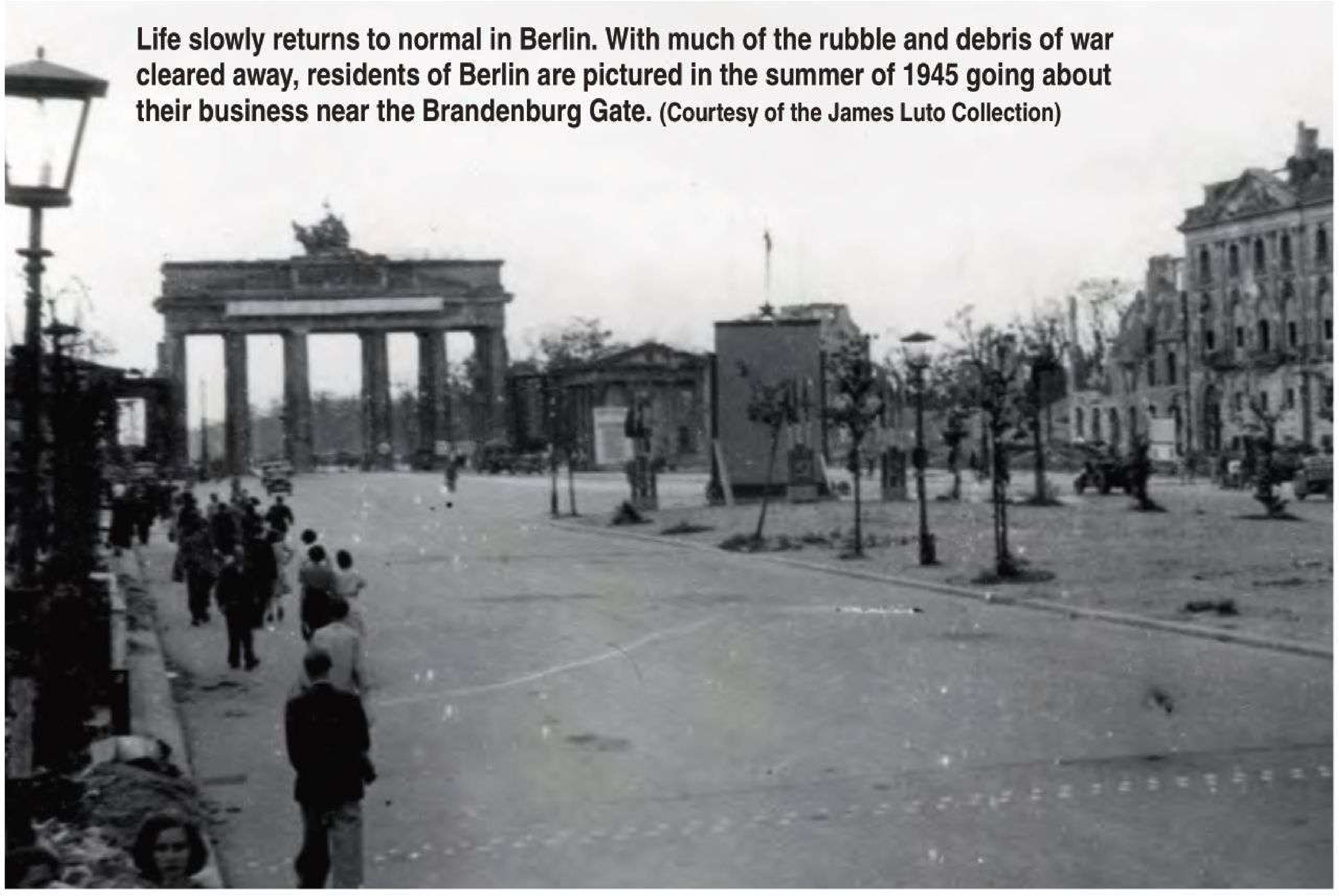
In this vein the likes of Montgomery and Bishop saw that their most urgent tasks in Germany were to restore law and order, prevent starvation, guard against the spread of disease, find shelter for the homeless, keep young people off the streets and start to rebuild the economy. This was an astounding task for the British to undertake in light of the severe problems in the United Kingdom with its crippling war debt, ongoing rationing, and hundreds of thousands of servicemen to absorb back into civilian life and, somehow, be found jobs.



A market stall open for business in the ruins of Nuremberg, October 21, 1946. (Dutch National Archives)

The work of rebuilding Germany begins. Lieutenant Frank Barnes of the 2nd Battalion Devonshire Regiment took this photograph from one of the balconies, overlooking Wilhelmstrassse, at the New Reich Chancellery in July 1945. It is believed to be a view of Wilhelmplatz. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

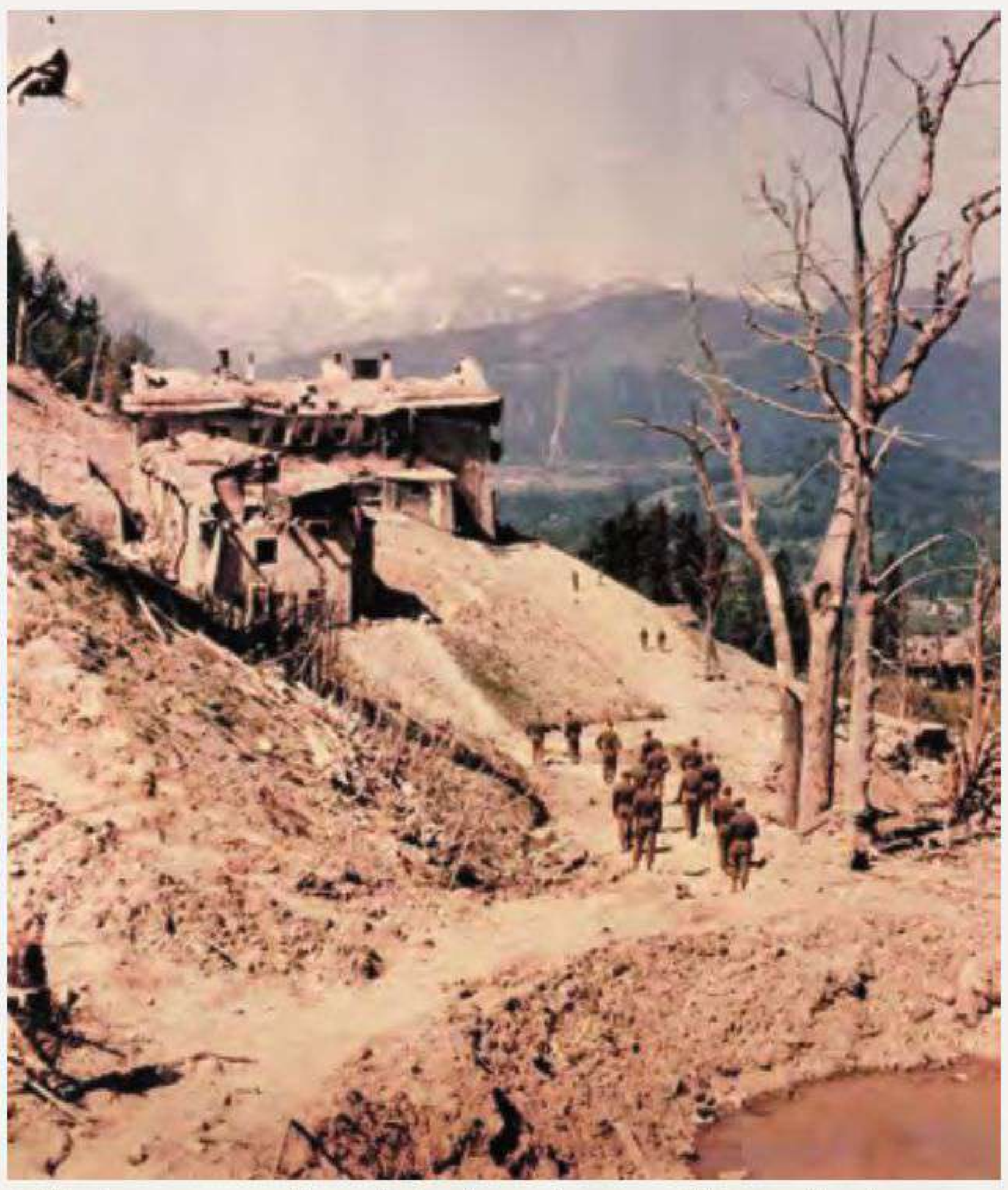
Churchill hardly eased the difficulties Montgomery was facing when he wrote, on June 5, that he expected that the Germans would hold the field marshal responsible for ensuring that they were fed: "It would not be thought a good ending to the war if you had a Buchenwald in Germany this winter with millions instead of thousands dying." If that was not bad enough, Templer declared that: "You must resign yourself to the fact that two million are going to die of hunger in Europe. You and the Army must do all you can to mitigate it, but you won't be able to cure it."[4]



Life slowly returns to normal in Berlin. With much of the rubble and debris of war cleared away, residents of Berlin are pictured in the summer of 1945 going about their business near the Brandenburg Gate. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

There was another element to the dire situation in Germany. Towards the end of the First World War a virulent form of influenza took hold and killed possibly as many as 100 million people. So bad were conditions in Germany, there was a distinct possibility, indeed an inevitability, that without vigorous help and support, epidemics would spread throughout the country, endangering the health of the Occupying Forces and of the whole of Western Europe.

These burdens placed on Montgomery were staggering. With little prospect of help from war-torn Britain, the way he set about solving the enormous problems with which he was faced was to make use of the army and treat the work that needed to be done as if it were a military operation. The battles he and his troops had fought to win the war were followed by another to win the peace, which he called 'The Battle of the Winter', the objectives of which were not to repel enemy attack or win territory, but to provide 'food, work and homes'.



Allied personnel, mainly American soldiers, in the ruins of Berchtesgaden in 1945. In the centre is Hitler's house, and in the foreground a great water-filled crater, the result of bombing by the RAF. (NARA)

LAW AND ORDER

Some five million people had been made homeless because of the Allied bombing. Their numbers were swelled by almost as many, perhaps even more, slave or forced labourers who had been taken into Germany and duly freed, individuals who were quite literally wandering through the country. These displaced persons, or DPs as they were commonly known, had no money and no food and so looted and murdered to survive. There was, naturally, considerable sympathy among British officers for these victims of the Nazi regime, but their priority was the enforcement of law and order, not humanitarian concerns, and crimes had to be punished, whoever committed them.

While there were still German police at their posts, following the surrender they were not permitted to carry guns and so were helpless when faced with armed gangs. This left just the Allied soldiers to maintain law and order, and looters might be shot, regardless of their nationality or how desperate their situations had become.

For the German population, food and fuel, especially as summer turned into autumn, were a very pressing need and so, in true military fashion, Operation *Barleycorn* was initiated with the release of PoWs to work on the land and help bring in the harvest. This was soon followed by Operation *Coalscuttle*, in which more German prisoners of war were released to work in the coalmines of the Ruhr. This was not just a logistical expedient. What benefit could there possibly be in keeping young men interned when the war was over? In prison they would have to be fed, exacerbating the enormous food problem that already existed, whereas the work they

A view of the front of the Reichstag pictured after the end of the war in Europe. Rubble and wreckage still litter the ground in front of it. (Historic Military Press)

DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE

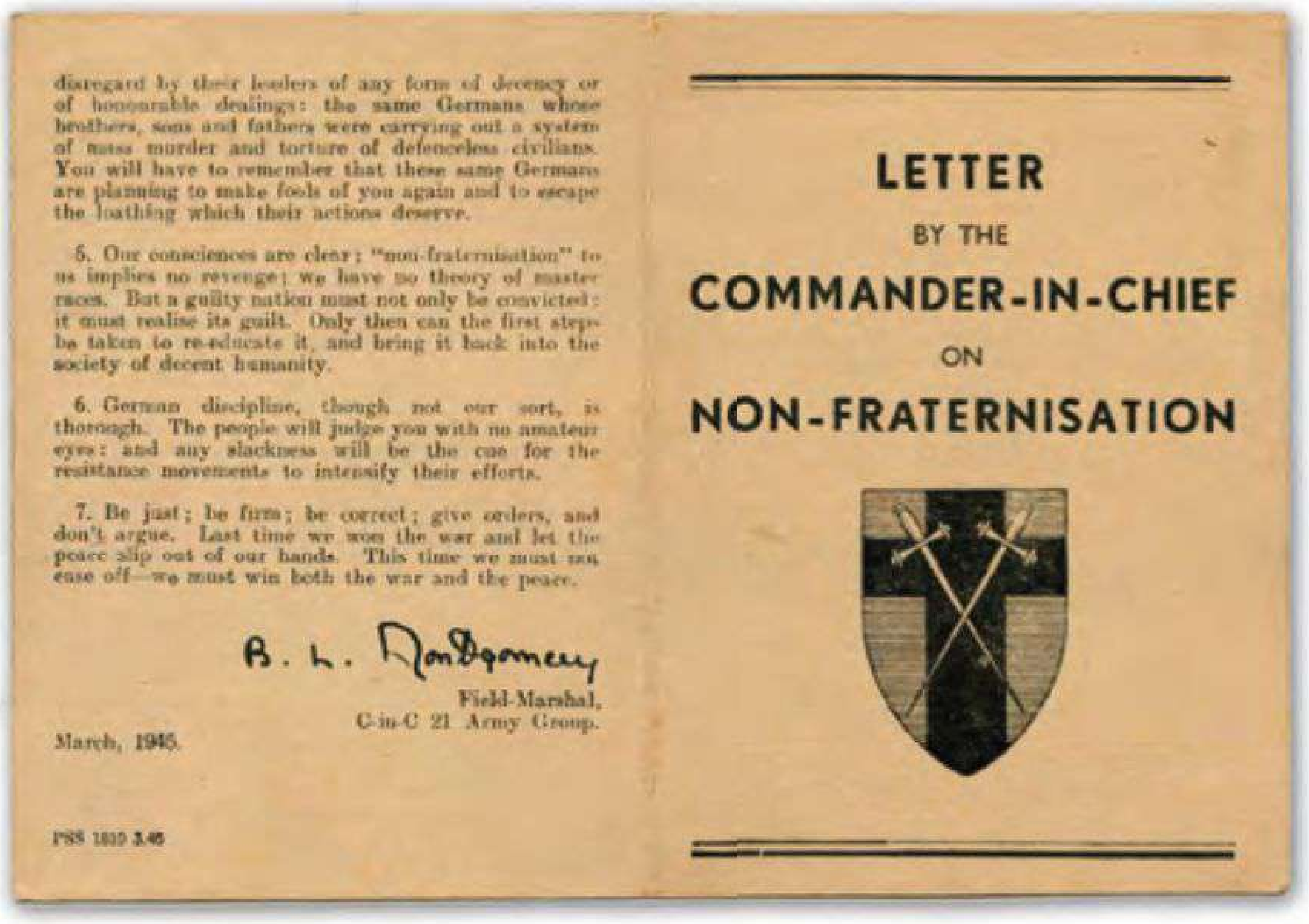
The Nuremberg War Crimes trial in session on December 4, 1945. (Dutch National Archives)

The defendants in the dock during the first of the Nuremberg war crimes trials, which began on November 20, 1945. The trial ended in October the following year. (NARA)

would find in the fields or the mines would enable them to look after themselves as well as helping the community at large.

Efforts were also made by the British to encourage the rebuilding of German industry. Whereas the first interests of many of the British was to seize whatever they could in the guise of reparations, this was quickly turned on its head, as the victors helped to restore the German factories. Perhaps the most notable of these efforts was that undertaken by Major Ivan Hirst of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers.

After D-Day Hirst had been in charge of a tank repair facility in Belgium and did not arrive in Germany until the British took over control of the Volkswagen factory at Wolfsburg, from the Americans, in the summer of 1945. Hirst's original brief was to run a workshop for British Army vehicles in the badly damaged plant.



disregard by their leaders of any form of decency or of honourable dealings: the same Germans whose brothers, sons and fathers were carrying out a system of mass murder and torture of defenceless civilians. You will have to remember that these same Germans are planning to make fools of you again and to escape the loathing which their actions deserve.

5. Our consciences are clear; "non-fraternisation" to us implies no revenge; we have no theory of master races. But a guilty nation must not only be convicted: it must realise its guilt. Only then can the first steps be taken to re-educate it, and bring it back into the society of decent humanity.

6. German discipline, though not our sort, is thorough. The people will judge you with no amateur eyes: and any slackness will be the cue for the resistance movements to intensify their efforts.

7. Be just; be firm; be correct; give orders, and don't argue. Last time we won the war and let the peace slip out of our hands. This time we must not ease off—we must win both the war and the peace.

B. L. Montgomery

Field-Marshal,
C-in-C 21 Army Group.

March, 1945.

PSS 1810 3.45

LETTER
BY THE
COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF
ON
NON-FRATERNISATION

A copy of one of the four Non-Fraternisation Orders issued by Field Marshal Montgomery to British personnel based in Germany between March and September 1945. This is the front of Order No.1, which was produced in March 1945. (Courtesy of the James Luto Collection)

"The British Army thought differently," notes Hirst's obituary in *The Guardian*, "and, after one of the few surviving wartime Volkswagen cars had been demonstrated to the British Rhine Army group headquarters, the military ordered a batch of 20,000 similar vehicles. By the end of 1945, the factory had somehow managed to put together 2,490 cars. Many of them were then bartered for materials to make further cars, or for provisions to feed the 6,000 workers and other citizens of Wolfsburg.

"Ivan Hirst was the man who got production going. He organised the clearance of bomb damage and had the buildings repaired; he re-commissioned machine tools, body presses and assembly jigs; he concerned himself with improving the quality of the car, with setting up a sales and service network and with starting exports – the first went to Holland in 1947."

By the time that Hirst was posted away in 1949, Volkswagen had become the largest automobile maker in Germany.

DENAZIFICATION

Economic reconstruction, however, could not proceed unless the workers were adequately fed, so the provision of food was the British Army's first and major priority. It was also the case that attempts at democratic political and social reform were pointless if all people could think about was their next meal.

That political and social reform, which was considered by all the Allied nations as being essential if Germany was to take its place alongside the other civilised nations of the world, took the form of ridding the country of all the vestiges and ideals of the Nazi Party. This process – denazification – was carried out by all the Allied Powers, and with great ruthlessness in the Soviet Zone of Occupation.

The scale of this operation can possibly be gleaned from the fact that 8.5 million Germans had been members of the Nazi Party. Many of these still held important positions within their local communities. While the major party members, the likes of Göring, Goebbels and Keitel, all faced trials, many Nazi officials were permitted to continue in post. To simply have removed them all would have led to a complete breakdown in the existing order, such as it was. The Allies had enough to cope with without having to take over the day-to-day running of local government. Many bad people escaped punishment, no doubt, simply because it was more expedient to allow them to carry on in post as before.

THE MARSHALL PLAN

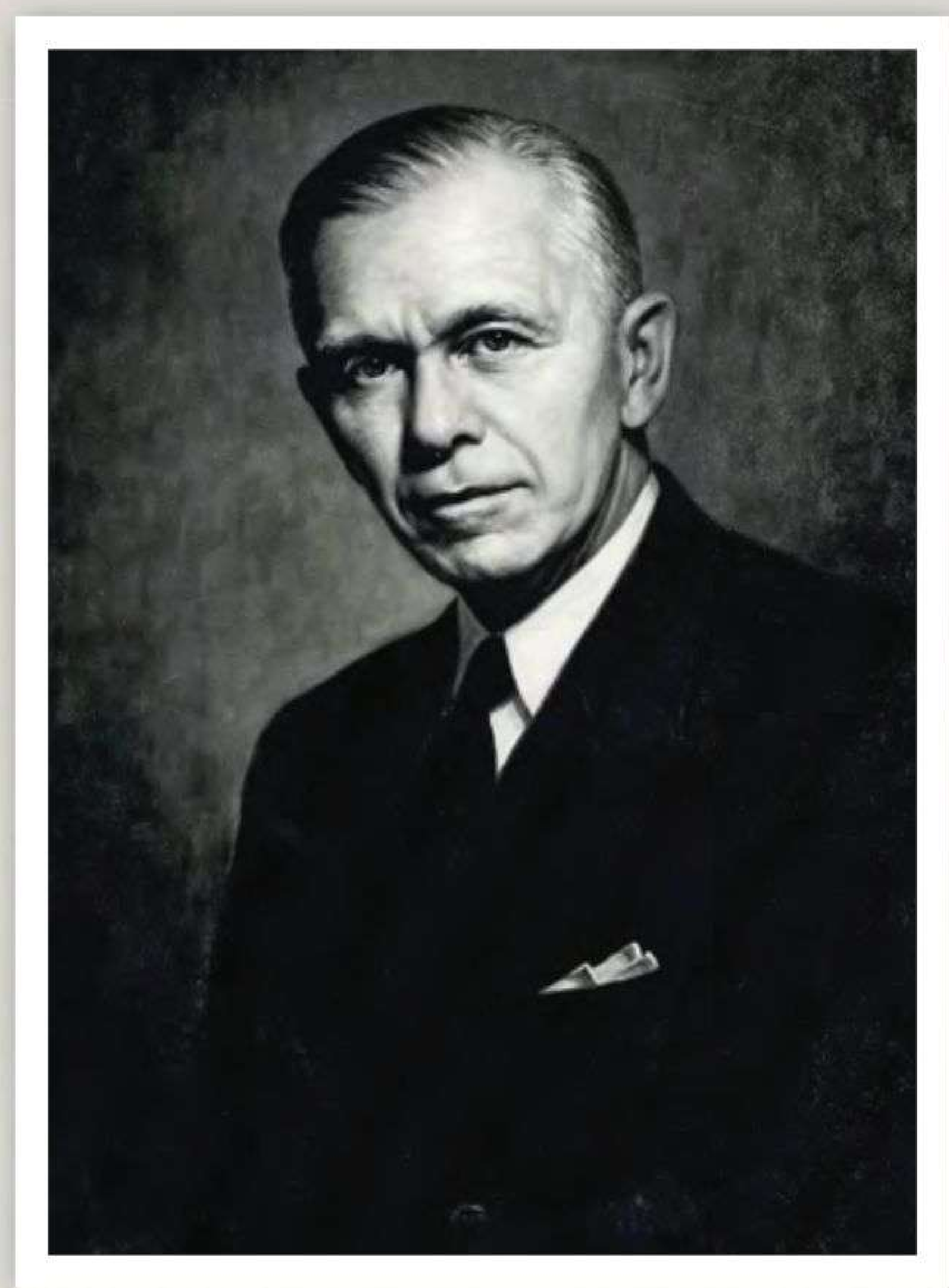
Much as the British representatives in Germany wanted to rebuild Germany, the war had cost the UK dearly. While the USA had sent vast amounts of materiel to Britain under the Lend-Lease Act, this was no gift. The UK had to pay back every last cent it had borrowed, and that debt was not repaid until 2006. The only country which still had the financial muscle to help rebuild Germany was America.

As with Britain, the original American proposal put forward to deal with Germany after the war was to remove Germany's ability to wage war by eliminating its arms industry, along with the removal or destruction of other key industries basic to military strength. The US aim was for Germany to become "primarily agricultural and pastoral in its character". This scheme, known as the Morgenthau Plan, was not fully implemented as the American representatives reached the same conclusions as the British had – that Germany needed to be put back on a sound footing – though it seems to have taken them considerably longer to fully appreciate this.

As late as February 2, 1946, Brigadier General William H. Draper Jr., chief of the American Economics Division, wrote that some progress had been made in converting Germany to an agricultural and light industry economy, but that this would not be enough. He explained that Germany's future industrial and economic pattern was being drawn for a population of 66.5 million. On that basis, he said, the nation will need large imports of food and raw materials to maintain a minimum standard of living. General agreement, he continued, had been reached on the types of German exports to take the place of the heavy industrial products which formed most of the country's pre-war exports.

BERLINER-NOT-PROGRAMM
MIT
MARSHALL-PLAN-HILFE

Reconstruction work continues in Berlin in the shadow of a poster promoting the Marshall Plan. Because of this programme, and other Allied efforts, even a year before the end of the Marshall Plan in 1951, Germany had surpassed her pre-war industrial production levels. (NARA)



George C. Marshall, the US Secretary of State between January 21, 1947 and January 20, 1949. (US State Department)

It was not until 1947 that the United States finally accepted that a prosperous Europe was to America's advantage, particularly in preventing the spread of communism. In March of that year, the US Joint Chiefs declared that the "complete revival of German industry, particularly coal mining", was now of "primary importance" to American security.

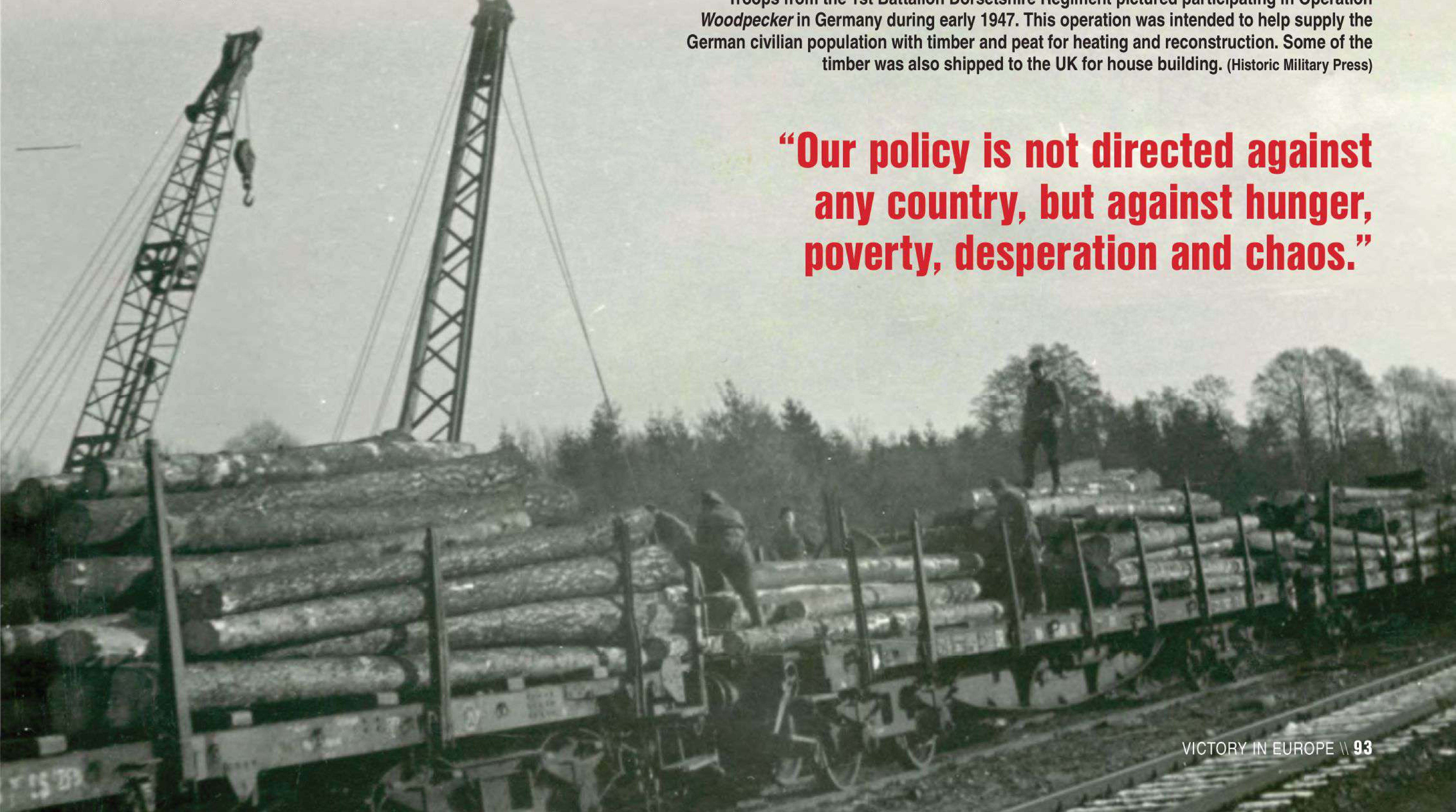
This was echoed in a speech given by US Secretary of State, General George Marshall, on June 5, 1947. This included the following: "It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health to the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace." There was also a humanitarian element in Marshall's considerations: "Our policy is not directed against any country, but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos."

Eventually, what became known as the Marshall Plan (also referred to as the European Recovery Program) was implemented. Under this, America gave $12bn to help the countries of Europe rebuild their economies. Eleven per cent of that total went to West Germany.

Germany today is a settled and prosperous nation, chiefly because of the assistance it received through the Marshall Plan. However, this is also due, in no small part, to the humanitarian instincts which Montgomery displayed in helping the enemies he had fought for so long to rebuild their country and reassert themselves as a people. Britain had, along with its allies, won the war, but of equal importance was the fact that it laid the foundations for a peace in Europe which has reigned until this day.

NOTES:

1. Major General Alec, *Look Back with Pleasure* (Beckley, unpublished, 1971), Imperial War Museum, p.88.
2. Bernard Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein* (Collins, London, 1958), p.345.
3. Quoted in Christopher Knowles, *Winning the Peace: the British in Occupied Germany, 1945-1948* (Doctoral Thesis, King's College, London, February 2014), p.50.
4. ibid, p.53.



Troops from the 1st Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment pictured participating in Operation *Woodpecker* in Germany during early 1947. This operation was intended to help supply the German civilian population with timber and peat for heating and reconstruction. Some of the timber was also shipped to the UK for house building. (Historic Military Press)

> **"Our policy is not directed against any country, but against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos."**

AN IRON CURTAIN

On March 5, 1946, Sir Winston Churchill visited Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, where he gave a speech he called 'Sinews of Peace'. It contained a message which sent a chill of fear around the world.

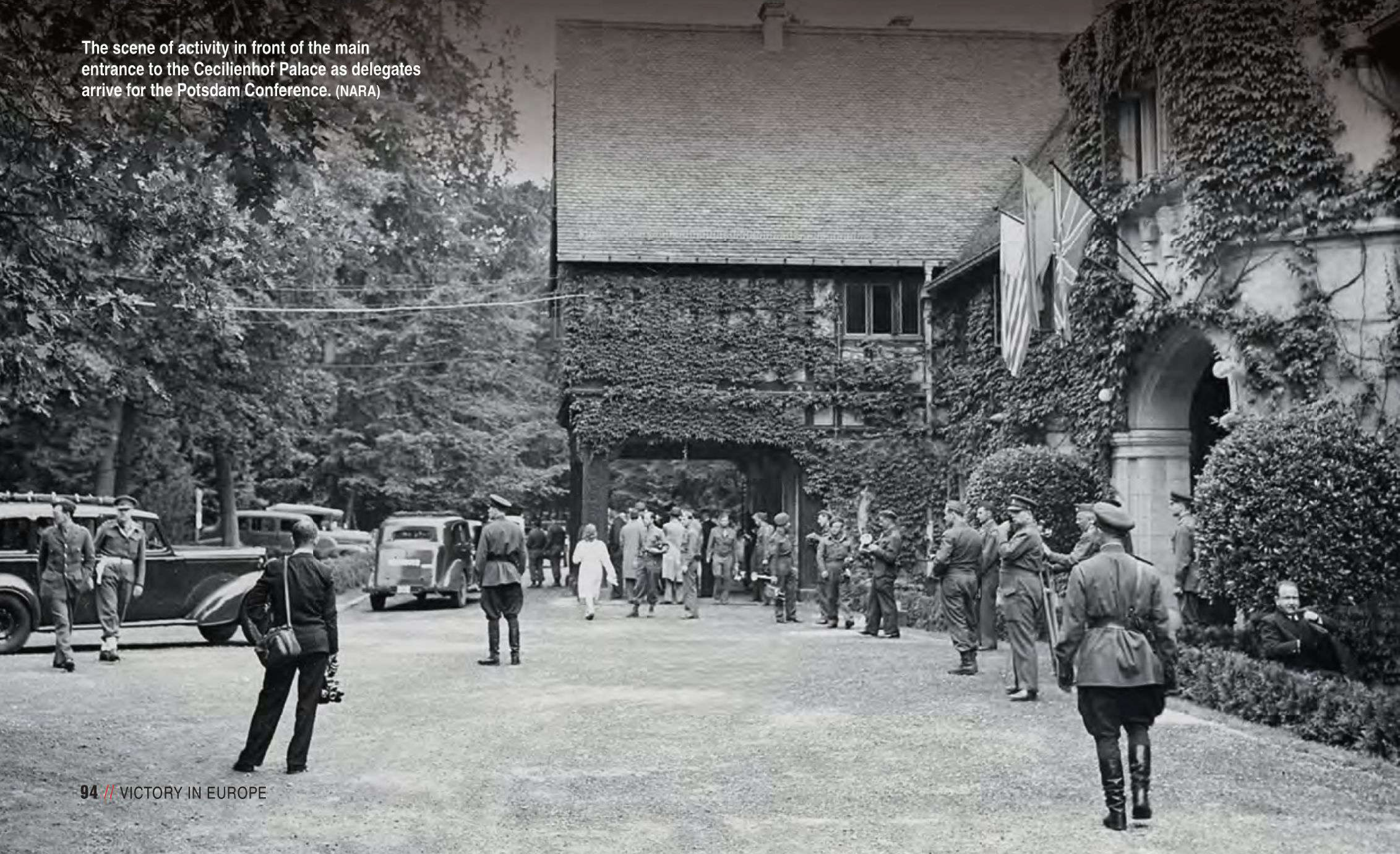
On July 17, 1945, Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill – to put them in order of their military and economic strength – met for the last time. This historic conference took place at Potsdam, 16 miles to the southwest of Berlin. The 'Big Three' had met just twice before during the war when plans for the defeat of Germany had been as important a factor for discussion, as had been the shape of the post-war world.

To some degree, even at Yalta the Allies had shared a common goal, with harmony an important consideration and idealistic pronouncements easy to make. At Potsdam it was hard bargaining. The result was not only the dividing of Berlin into zones of occupation, but the splitting of Europe into two spheres, East and West, and of two opposing ideologies. As has been seen so often throughout history, division creates suspicion, fear and hatred – us and them.

Such sentiments were already being felt in 1945 and were to become ingrained in the subsequent years. US and Soviet soldiers had shaken hands on the Oder, but there was no such welcome in Berlin. Indeed, the Soviets did all they could to prevent the Americans from entering the city, using such excuses as mine clearance having not been completed or that the roads were blocked by the re-deployment of Red Army units. It was not until June 23 that an American 'Preliminary Reconnaissance Party' was finally allowed to enter Berlin, the Soviets in the meantime seizing every valuable item they could remove from the German capital.

Even when Colonel Frank L. Howley's column reached the River Elbe at Dessau, only half of his 500 men were permitted into Berlin. His much-reduced force proceeded under close Red Army escort, only to then be held up at Babelsberg, just short of the city. Eventually, Howlet gave up and turned back.

It was only when Eisenhower's deputy, General Lucius Clay, and the British Military Governor, Sir Roland Weeks, travelled to Berlin that the Soviet obstructions were removed. But even then, the Russians said that the British and Americans could only pass through Soviet controlled territory on one main road, one railway line or two air corridors. Just weeks after the end of three years fighting as allies, the invisible barriers were in place between them that would, before long, take on a very physical form.

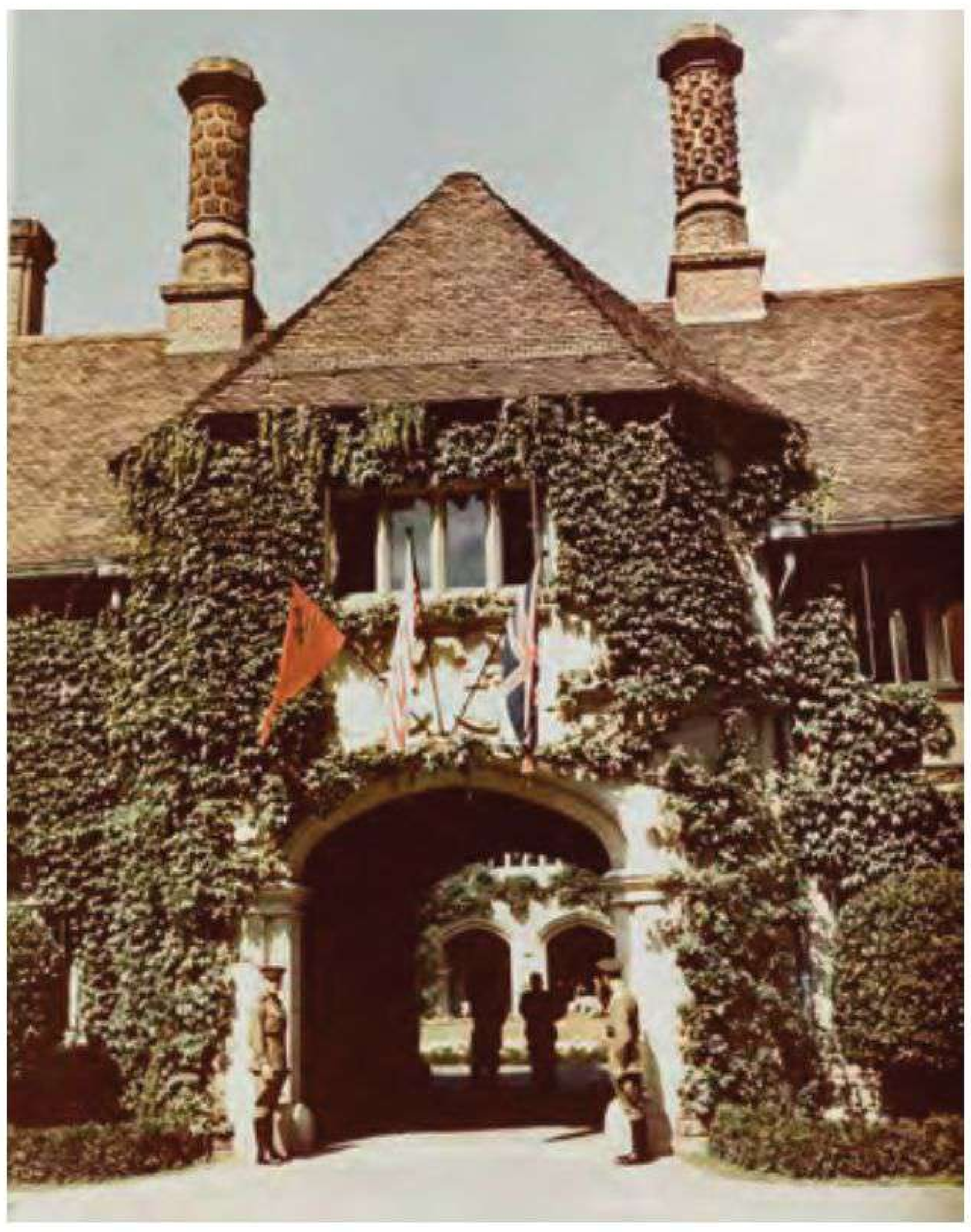


The scene of activity in front of the main entrance to the Cecilienhof Palace as delegates arrive for the Potsdam Conference. (NARA)

BRITISH WEAKNESS

By the summer of 1945 so much had changed. Roosevelt had died in office and Churchill had been swept aside in the July general election. Stalin was left to rule the roost, more powerful than ever. At Potsdam it was agreed that Germany's borders would be shifted hundreds of miles further west and that Poland would receive most of that land, the Poles, however, losing territory in the east to Russia.

The German population of those territories taken over by Poland would be relocated "in an orderly and humane manner". Five million Germans were indeed removed, but were often brutally driven out. Similarly, the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia were also expelled, with women being raped, families robbed, and individuals murdered. These people fled, if they could, to West Germany where they added to the already alarming humanitarian crisis that was developing there – for the Western Powers were experiencing considerable difficulty feeding the existing population of a devastated country.



Soviet, American and British flags adorn the main entrance of the Cecilienhof Palace, where the Potsdam Conference was held. Soviet officers can be seen on duty. (USNHHC)

Prime Minister Winston Churchill's official car parked in front of the Little White House, where President Harry S. Truman resided during the Potsdam Conference, on July 16, 1945. This building was located at No.2 Kaiserstrasse, in Babelsberg, between Berlin and Potsdam. Attlee participated alongside Churchill while awaiting the outcome of the 1945 general election, and then replaced him as Prime Minister after the Labour Party's defeat of the Conservatives was confirmed. (NARA)

Yet, Britain and America were powerless to stop this exodus, for they could hardly threaten Stalin and risk a confrontation with the Soviet Union, especially as the war against Japan – which, as had been demonstrated at Pearl Harbor, posed a more immediate danger to homeland USA than Germany ever did – was still ongoing.

It was also understandable that with the end of the war in the Pacific in August 1945, America had to focus much of its attention towards the occupation, and possible rehabilitation, of Japan. To some degree Europe had to be left to sort out its own problems. This had been envisaged by Roosevelt, who saw that the countries of Western Europe would have to find a way of living with the Soviets, or, as he believed might eventually be the case, accept Soviet domination. Roosevelt believed that the post-war world would be one shared by two power blocks, the USA and the USSR.

This thinking, to a large degree, came about because of the weakness of Great Britain. Before the war, the United Kingdom had still been, arguably, the most powerful country in the world. It had even extended the lands under its control after the First World War. But the Second World War had taken the UK to the brink of bankruptcy. Roosevelt, therefore, believed that it was Washington and Moscow that would rule the post-world. So, at a crucial time, when the USA and the other countries of the Western Alliance should have been standing up to the Soviets with the threat of nuclear weapons to back up their authority, they simply acquiesced – America because it felt there was no point in challenging Stalin, Britain and others in West Europe because they were unable to do so.

With the West unable or unwilling to intervene in Soviet affairs, the Russians were unrestrained in their ravaging of East Germany. By March 1947, 11,800 kilometres of railway track, almost half the 1938 total, had been removed from the Soviet Zone of Germany, as well as 30% of its industrial capacity.

It was not only physical objects that disappeared. Those who dared to speak out against the new regime in East Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), were also removed, even if they were in the British or American sectors. One British employee of the Control Council in Berlin saw how it was done: "It was all over in seconds. A car screeched to a sudden halt, hefty men jumped out, grabbed their victim, bundled him into their vehicle and, before those who witnessed it could even begin to comprehend what had happened, they were racing off in the direction of the Soviet sector."[1]

A COLD WAR

The Stalinist view was that there could never be a close relationship with the capitalist countries, and Soviet efforts were directed towards strengthening their own socialist bloc and to weakening that of the western democracies. This was not fully appreciated in the West until February 1946, when the United States finally accepted that the ideals of Yalta and Potsdam were never going to be realised. This was because George F. Kennan was asked by Freeman Mathews, the head of the European division in the State Department, to provide an assessment of Soviet policy.

In a long telegram to Washington, Kennan described dealing with Soviet Communism as "undoubtedly the

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The British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, disembarks from his aircraft at RAF Gatow, Berlin, en route to the Potsdam Conference. (NARA)

The opening session of the Potsdam Conference gets underway. (NARA)

The three main Allied heads of government at Potsdam, Germany, circa July 28 to August 1, 1945. Left to right are Prime Minister Clement Atlee, President Harry S. Truman and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. (USNHHC)

greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced and probably greatest it will ever have to face". He wrote that the Soviets perceived themselves at perpetual war with capitalism and that they considered it "desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken if Soviet power is to be secure".[2]

This was echoed in equally stark terms just a few weeks later by Winston Churchill in his famous 'Sinews of Peace' speech, which he delivered at Westminster College, in Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946. "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an 'iron curtain' has descended across the Continent," he declared. "Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow."

President Truman ordered further analysis of Soviet intentions and the policy of 'containment' of the Soviets came into being. The new stance which was to be adopted by the US was announced to Congress by Truman on March 12, 1947. It became known as the Truman Doctrine. "One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion," Truman declared. "This was a fundamental issue in the war with Germany and Japan. Our victory was won

Accompanied by his daughter Mary, Winston Churchill leaves Little White House, Truman's residence, and the Potsdam Conference after having officially been replaced by Clement Atlee on July 26, 1945. (NARA)

A Douglas C-47 Skytrain clears the rooftops after take-off from Berlin's Tempelhof airfield at the beginning of the Berlin Airlift, the first flights of which occurred on June 26, 1948. That day C-47s completed 32 flights in which they delivered 80 tons of supplies into Berlin. (USAF) over countries which sought to impose their will, and their way of life, upon other nations. The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive. The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms. If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world – and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation." The Cold War had begun.

THE BERLIN BLOCKADE

Further division occurred with the introduction of the Marshall Plan. Russia had been invaded twice by Germany in the course of just 30 years and on the second occasion an estimated 20 million of its people had died. It was understandable that Stalin wished to create a buffer zone between Russia and Germany and this it had achieved in occupying Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and the Balkan states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. When America began to offer financial assistance to the countries of Western Europe, including West Germany, Stalin viewed this as the US creating a powerful bloc aimed at once again threatening Russia.

Fearing that the offer of economic assistance to the countries under Soviet control would undermine the Kremlin's authority, not only did Russia refuse US aid – though this was offered by the White House – but Stalin ordered all the countries it had occupied to also reject the offer. There were also other factors involved in this decision. As Kennan had made clear, the Soviets truly believed that capitalism and the free market was an out-dated concept – exemplified by the Great Depression which had ravaged the economies of the Western world, and the vast inequality which existed between the wealthy classes and the exploited masses

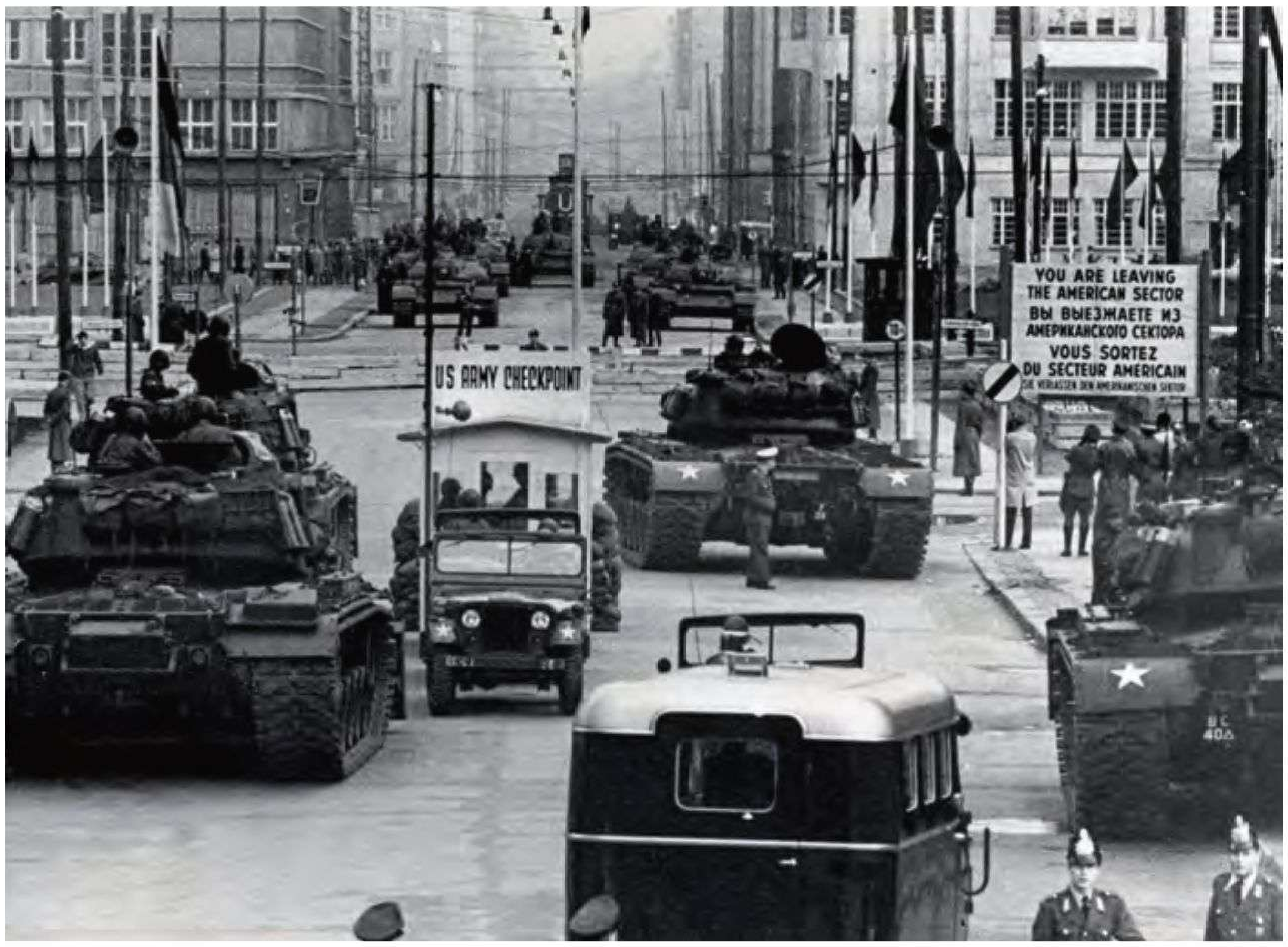
▶

Throughout the winter of 1948/9, Berliners endured extreme hardship as a result of the Soviet blockade. People could be seen in their thousands scouring their neighbouring forests for dead branches and tree stumps to burn. The search for fuel also involved the hunt for even the smallest morsel of coal. This image, dated January 31, 1949, shows an "aged Berlin housewife as she painstakingly searches for small pieces of coal among the rubble and debris". In some instances, these women were referred to as Trümmerfrauen, literally 'rubble women'. More correctly, though, these were ladies who helped clear and reconstruct the bombed cities of Germany in the years after the Second World War. (Historic Military Press)

As part of the airlift, new facilities were constructed by the Western allies. Indeed, by November 5, 1948, construction work of the new Tegel airfield was so advanced that it was felt it could enter provisional service in the Airlift. The original caption to this image states that, "a French guard of honour watches the first 'plane, a Skymaster, land on Tegel airfield during ceremonies marking the opening of new 'lift' airdrome." (Historic Military Press)

> "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an 'iron curtain' has descended across the Continent."

The Airlift was very much a combined effort – as this picture of a group of USAF C-54s being unloaded and refuelled at RAF Gatow by British personnel, shows. (Historic Military Press)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Tensions run high in Berlin, as US Army tanks and personnel face their Soviet or East German counterparts at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, October 1961. The construction of the Berlin Wall had started in August that year. (NARA)

– and that state control of the means of production for the benefit of the people as a whole, would inevitably be how every country would eventually be governed. Communism would win in the end. Stalin, therefore, could hardly admit that the USSR needed help from capitalist America.

It was the revival of West Germany, and of Western Europe in general, through US aid, which led to the first major confrontation with the Soviets. Though Britain, France and America had zones of occupation in Berlin, the city was inside the GDR and access to those zones was through Soviet-controlled territory. In June 1948, Moscow decided to cut off land access to West Berlin by rail and road. Rather than using the military to force a passage through the Soviet lines, Britain and the United States flew over the blockade in the largest airlift ever attempted to keep the people of Berlin supplied. When the blockade failed, the virtual siege broken by the remarkable Berlin Airlift, the Soviets erected a wall through the centre of Berlin which cut the city in two. No longer was there any doubt that the ideologies of East and West could never be reconciled. The Cold War would have to be fought until one side was the victor.

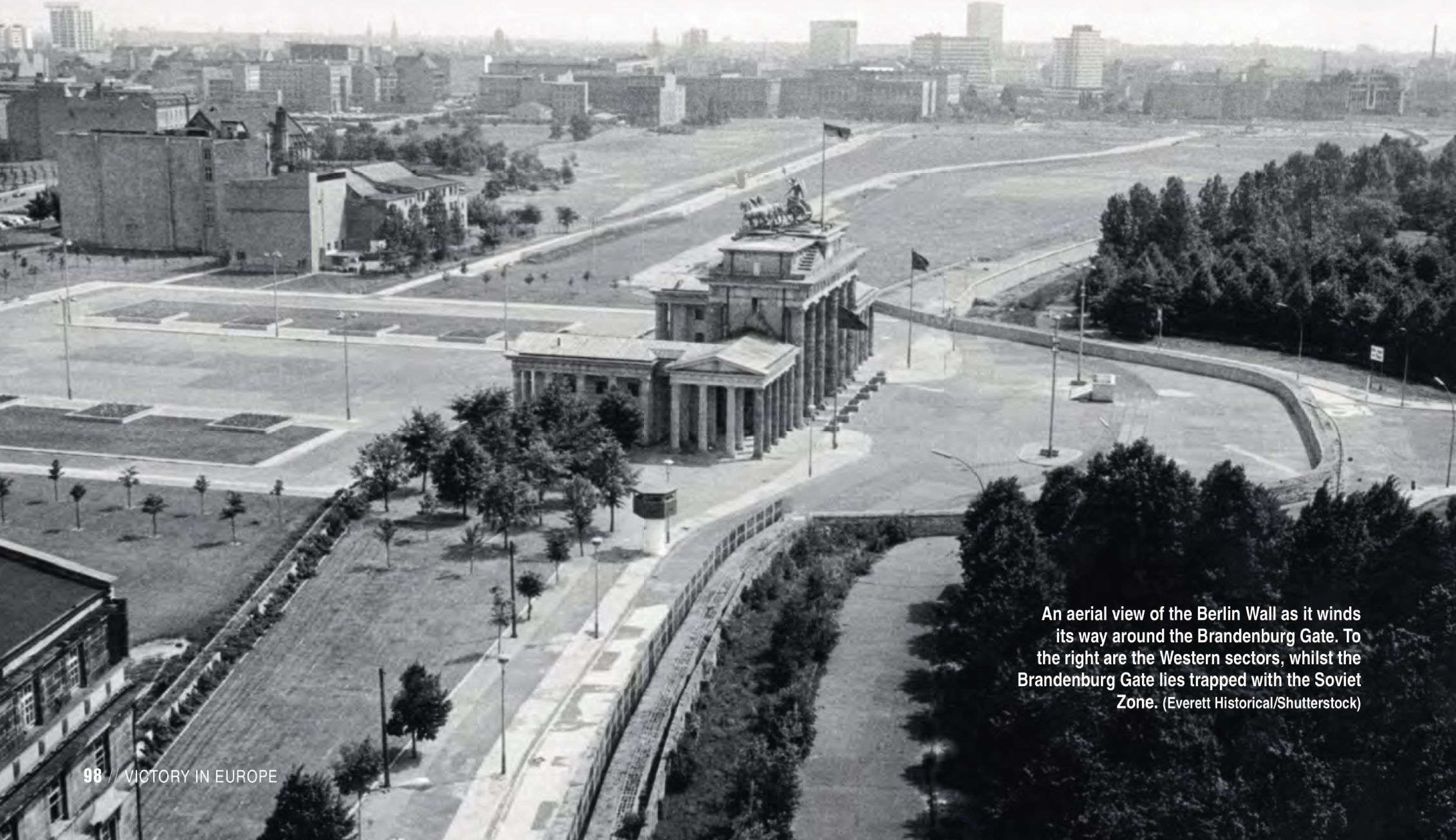
The raising of a physical barrier between East and West. East German personnel erecting barbed wire fences as part of the early Berlin Wall, circa August 1961. (NARA)

None of this was confined to Europe. The war had also wasted large parts of China and the Far East, where economies, and lives, had to be rebuilt. The old order had been swept away and, in its place, came communism and certainly not benevolent imperialism. Attempts by the former colonial powers to reassert their hold over their pre-war dominions met powerful independence movements, which saw communism as the antidote to capitalism.

The threat faced by the democratic countries was a global one, and conflicts were soon to rage in the Middle East, Vietnam and Korea. At one point, around three-quarters of the world's population lived under communist regimes. But it was in the place where the Cold War began, that it ended, when the Berlin Wall came down and Germany became a single and strong country once again.

NOTES:

1. George Clare, *Berlin Days 1946-47* (Papermac, London, 1994), p.177.
2. Quoted in Martin McCauley, *The Origins of the Cold War 1941-1949* (Pearson Education, London, 2003), p.70.



An aerial view of the Berlin Wall as it winds its way around the Brandenburg Gate. To the right are the Western sectors, whilst the Brandenburg Gate lies trapped with the Soviet Zone. (Everett Historical/Shutterstock)

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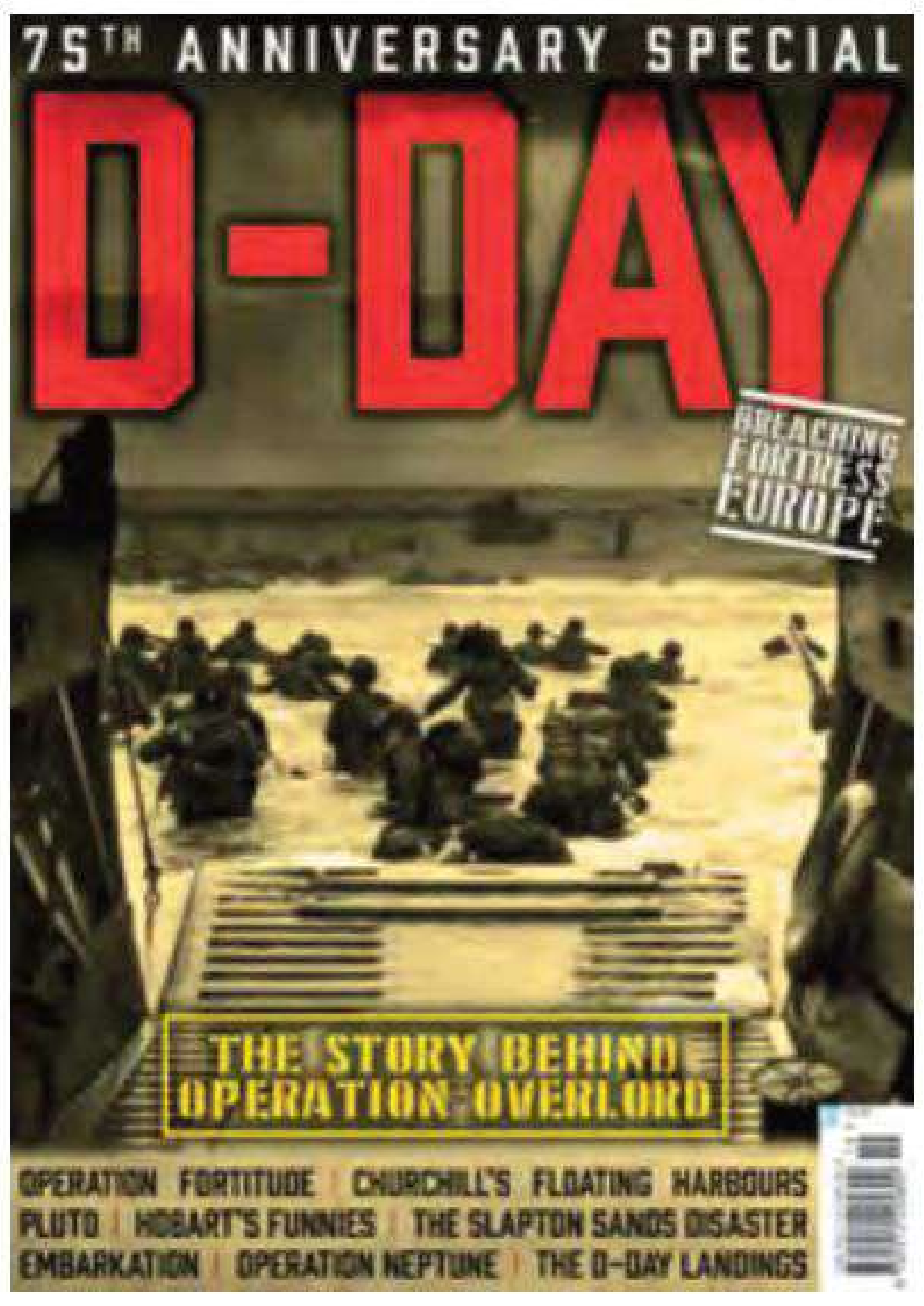
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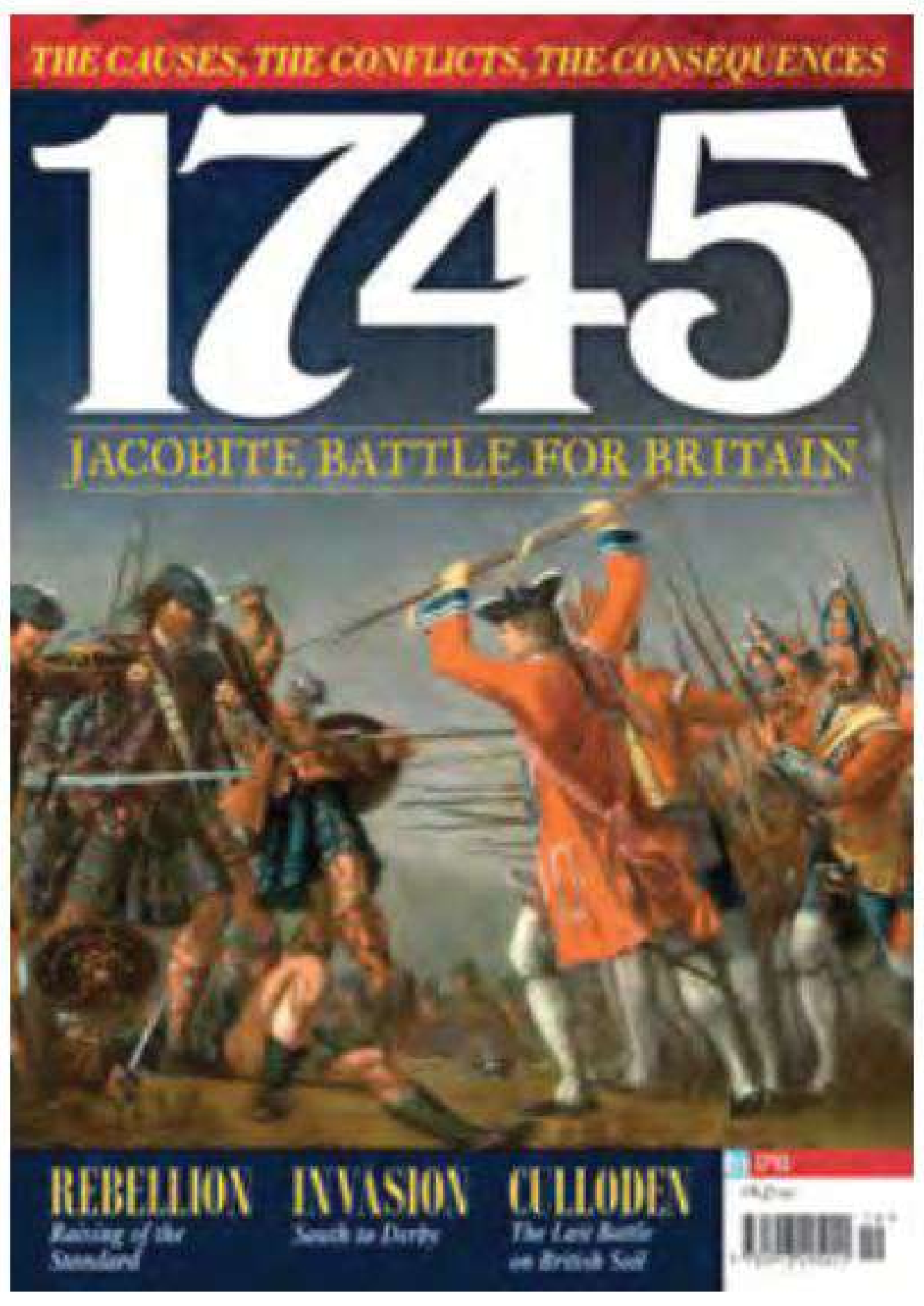
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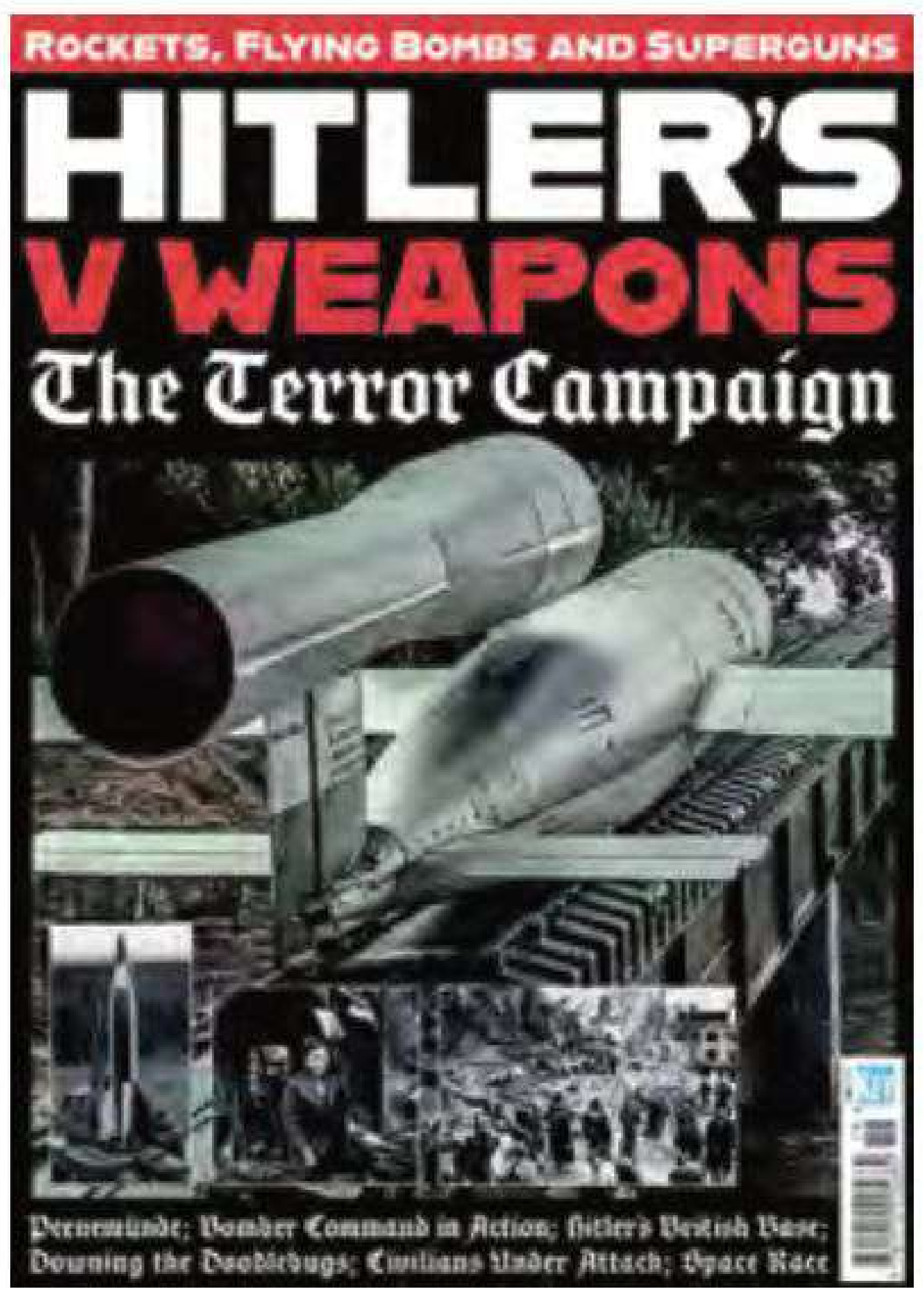
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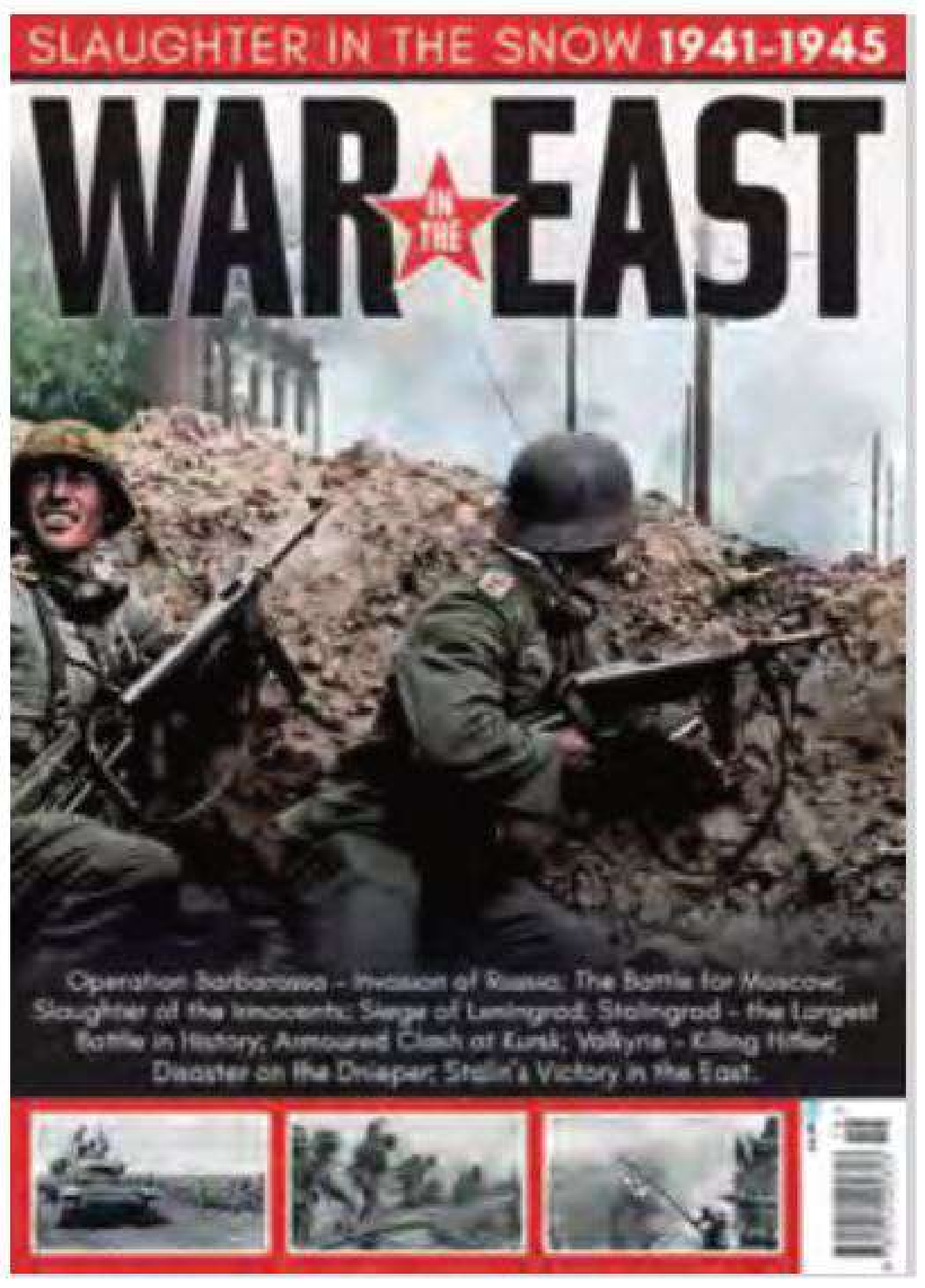
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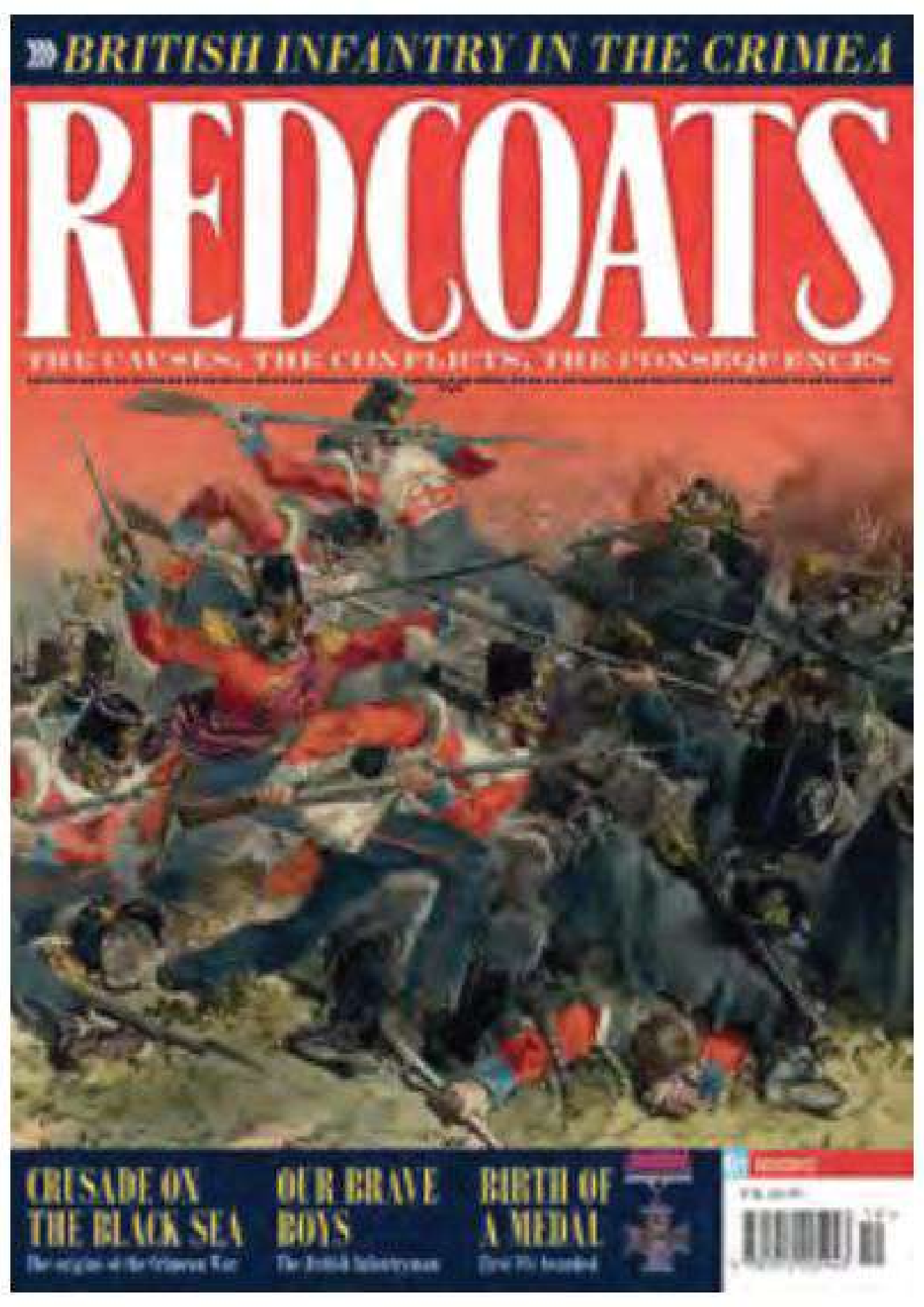
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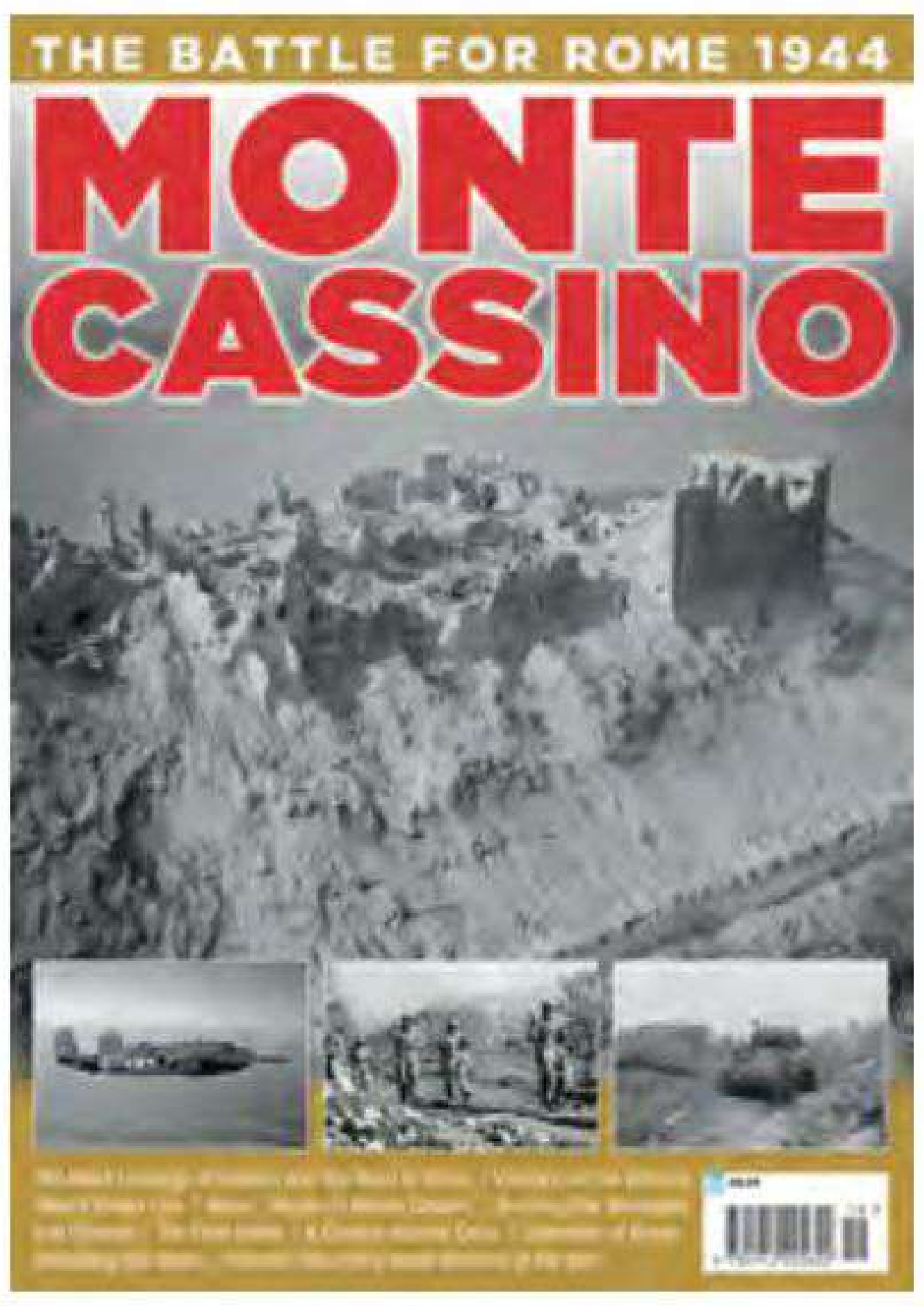
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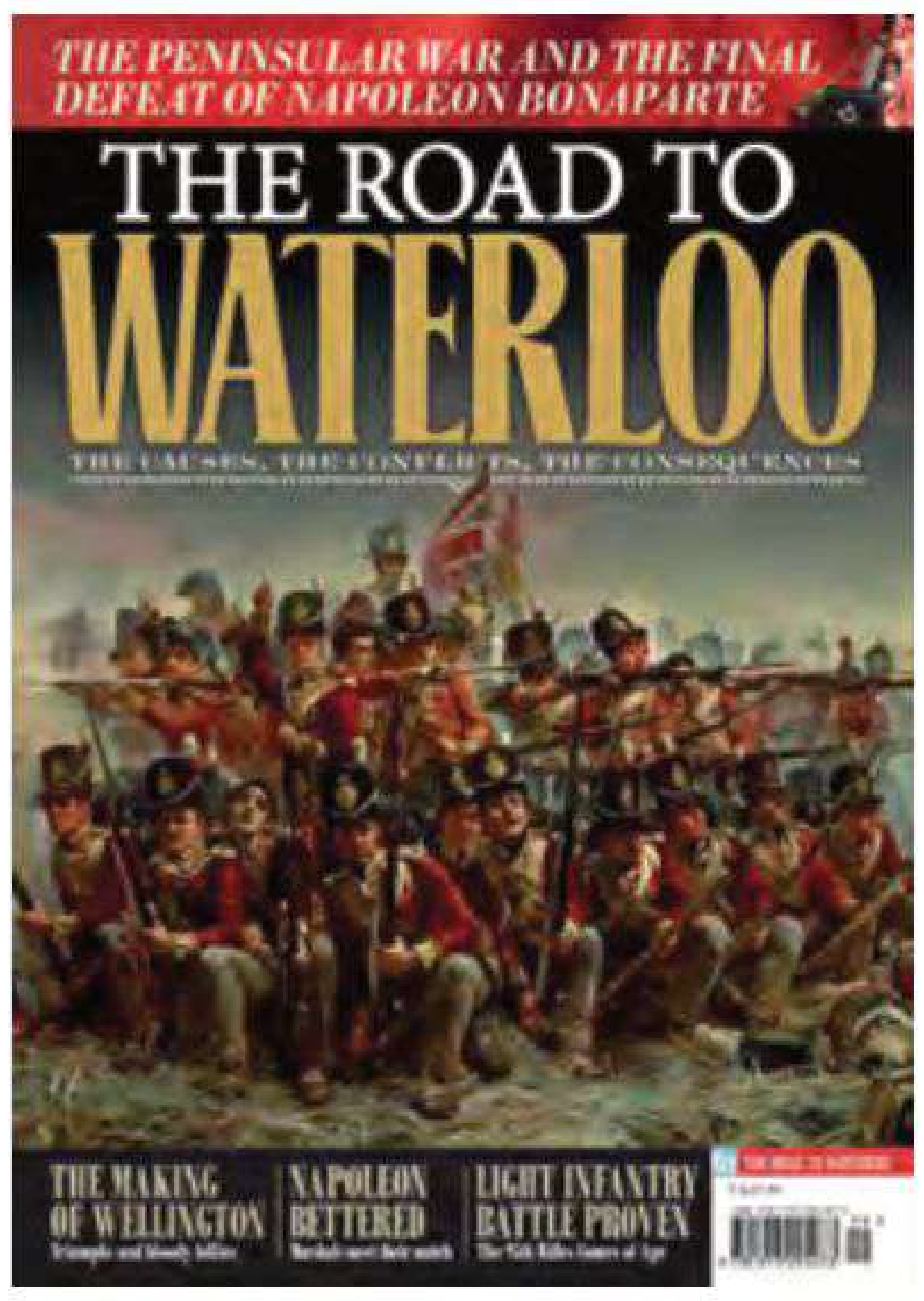
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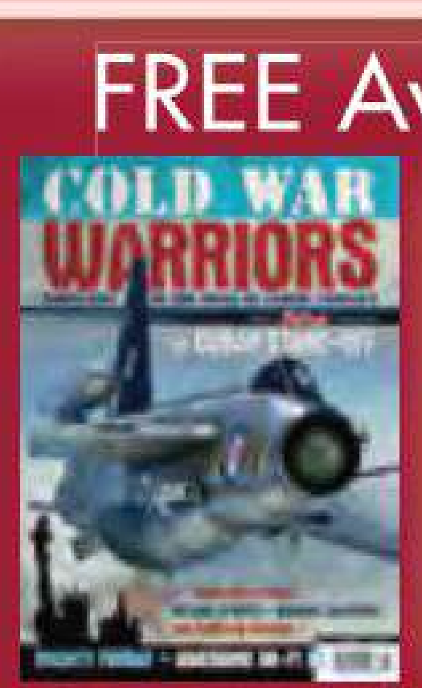
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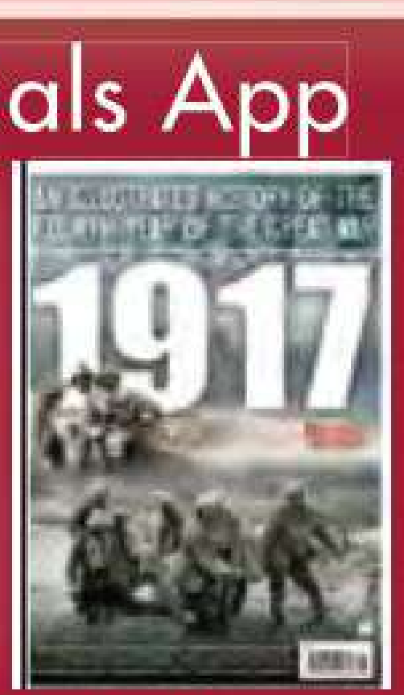

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